



Talk & Love

— HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS —

After the Toxic Relationship

A Therapist's Guide to
HEALING, CONFIDENCE
and **FINDING REAL LOVE**



Heal deeply.



Rebuild confidence.



Open your heart
to real love.

JAMES SEAL

RELATIONSHIP COUNSELLOR

Talk & Love™ — Healthy Relationships

After the Toxic Relationship

A Therapist's Guide to Healing, Confidence and Finding Real Love

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First published 2025

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Introduction

This Book Is Not About What Happened to You

You already know what happened. You have turned it over in your mind more times than you can count — replaying conversations, searching for the moment things changed, wondering what you missed, wondering what you caused. You have probably explained it to friends, to family, perhaps to a therapist. You have lived it from the inside, and you know it in a way nobody else fully can.

So this book does not begin there.

It begins here — with you, now, holding these pages. Still standing. Still willing to understand. Still, somewhere beneath the exhaustion and the doubt, hoping.

That hope is not naive. It is evidence of something important: you are not done. Whatever the relationship took from you — your confidence, your trust, your sense of who you are — it did not take that. And this book is written in service of it.

Who this book is for

This book is for anyone who has come through a relationship that hurt them — not just occasionally, not just in the ordinary painful ways that all relationships can hurt, but in the sustained, erosive way that leaves a person doubting their own perceptions, their own worth, their own right to need what they need.

You may have only recently left. You may have left years ago and still find yourself carrying something you cannot quite name. You may be in the tentative early stages of dating again, or you may not be anywhere near that — not yet. All of that is welcome here.

This book is also for people who are not entirely sure their relationship was toxic. If you find yourself wondering whether what you experienced was bad enough to count, I want to say this clearly: the fact that you are asking that question is often itself an answer. Toxic relationships are frequently characterised precisely by that confusion — the self-doubt, the minimising, the quiet erosion of your ability to trust your own experience. You do not need to have lived through something dramatic to be reading the right book.

What this book is built on

I have been working as an integrative counsellor and coach for over twenty years. In that time I have sat with hundreds of people navigating heartbreak, loss, and the slow, careful work of opening to connection again. I trained originally in biology at the University of Exeter — which gave me a deep and lasting respect for the human nervous system and the way our emotional and physical worlds are not separate things, but one integrated whole. That understanding runs through every page of this book.

Over the years I have trained in Neuro-Linguistic Programming, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, hypnotherapy, and integrative counselling. The approach I use with clients — and the approach that shapes this book — draws on Emotionally Focused Therapy, Transactional Analysis, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, attachment theory, and Polyvagal Theory. These are not competing frameworks. They are different lenses trained on the same territory: the human need for connection, and what happens when that need gets hurt.

I have tried to make the clinical material in this book accessible without making it shallow. Where I introduce a model or a concept, I explain it in plain language — because I believe you deserve to understand the map, not just be pointed in a direction.

The shape of this journey

This book is built around a single arc. It moves through four movements, and each one matters.

The first movement is Survivor. Before anything else, we need to name what happened — clearly, honestly, without minimising and without catastrophising. We look at what makes a relationship toxic, the patterns that kept you inside it, and how your attachment history shaped your experience. This is not about blame. It is about understanding.

The second movement is Student. Here we turn to the body — because toxic relationships do not only live in memory. They live in the nervous system. In the way you scan a room. In the way you brace before a difficult conversation. In the way your body learned, quite reasonably, that love was something to be wary of. This section draws on Polyvagal Theory and the concept of the window of tolerance to help you understand what happened physiologically — and what it takes to find safety again, in your own skin.

The third movement is Owner. This is where the book becomes, I hope, genuinely different from anything you have read before. It is the movement from understanding what happened to you, toward claiming what you now know about yourself. Because here is the truth that twenty years of clinical work has taught me: the things a toxic relationship revealed about you — your depth, your sensitivity, your capacity

for connection, even your vulnerabilities — are not your weakness. They are your most powerful compass for choosing differently. This section is about stepping out of victimhood — not by pretending the wound was not real, but by refusing to let it be the last word about who you are.

The fourth movement is Author. Dating again. Building something new. Learning what secure love actually feels like — and why your nervous system may resist it at first. This section is practical, honest, and grounded in what I have watched people actually need when they step back into the world of connection after a toxic relationship.

How to read this book

There is no right way. Some people will read from beginning to end. Others will skip to the section that feels most urgent. Both approaches are fine. The book is designed to hold together as a whole journey, but each part can also stand alone.

You will find exercises and reflection prompts throughout. I would encourage you to take them seriously — not because reading is insufficient, but because understanding something in your mind and feeling it shift in your body are two different things. The exercises are an invitation to the second kind of change.

You will also find, at the end of each chapter, a single invitation — to continue the journey at the Talk & Love™ guided path online. That path was built to walk alongside exactly what you are reading here. It is there whenever you feel ready for it.

A final note before we begin

I have tried to write this book the way I try to work with clients — with honesty, with warmth, and without pretending that healing is simpler or faster than it actually is.

What happened to you was real. The damage was real. And the recovery — the genuine, embodied, lasting kind — is also real. I have watched it happen more times than I can count. Not because people forced themselves to be fine, but because they were willing to understand themselves more deeply, and to use that understanding as the beginning of something new.

That is what this book is for.

You are not broken. You are not damaged goods. You are someone whose nervous system learned — quite reasonably — to protect you from pain. And now, slowly and on your own terms, you are learning something new.

Let us begin.

James Seal

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When you are ready to take the next step, the Talk & Love™ *Ready to Date Again* guided path will be there — whenever that moment comes.

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Part One — Survivor

Naming What Happened

Part One covers Chapters 1, 2 and 3. Its purpose is not to dwell in the past but to understand it clearly enough that it stops running your present. You cannot leave behind what you have not named.

Chapter One

What Makes a Relationship Toxic

It probably did not start the way it ended. Most toxic relationships begin with intensity — a feeling of being truly seen, chosen, wanted. The connection felt real because in many ways it was. That is one of the most disorienting things about where you find yourself now: you are not recovering from something that was always obviously wrong. You are recovering from something that once felt like the most right thing in the world.

This chapter is about naming what happened. Not to assign blame, not to build a case, and not to reduce a complex human relationship to a label — but because clarity is the beginning of freedom. When we cannot name what we experienced, we cannot fully understand it. And when we cannot understand it, we tend to carry it forward into the next relationship, and the one after that.

So let us begin with a question that sounds simple but rarely is: what actually makes a relationship toxic?

Not all difficult relationships are toxic

This distinction matters, and it is worth spending a moment on it. All relationships go through difficult periods. All relationships involve conflict, misattunement, disappointment, and repair. A relationship is not toxic simply because it was hard, or because it ended painfully, or because one or both people behaved badly under stress.

What distinguishes a toxic relationship from a merely difficult one is not the presence of conflict but the presence of patterns — sustained, repeated dynamics that systematically undermine one person's sense of self, safety, or reality. The difficulty in a toxic relationship is not something that ebbs and flows around a basically stable foundation. It is the foundation.

I say this not to minimise what you have been through, but to sharpen the lens. Because when we understand precisely what made the relationship toxic — not just that it was painful, but how and why — we gain something genuinely useful: the ability to recognise those patterns earlier, in ourselves and in others, and to choose differently.

The core features of a toxic relationship

Toxic relationships take many forms and exist on a wide spectrum of severity. Not every toxic relationship involves physical danger or dramatic incidents. Many are characterised by quieter, more insidious patterns that are harder to name and therefore harder to leave. What follows is not an exhaustive clinical list — it is a map of the territory most commonly described by people who have lived through this.

Coercive control

Coercive control is a pattern of behaviour that seeks to take away the other person's freedom and autonomy — usually gradually, and often invisibly at first. It can include controlling what a person wears, who they see, where they go, how they spend money, and what they are allowed to think or feel. It does not require physical violence to be profoundly damaging. The effect of sustained coercive control is a gradual shrinking of the self — a narrowing of the world until the relationship becomes the only reference point for reality.

If you found yourself asking permission for things you once did freely, if you noticed your world becoming smaller and your sense of yourself becoming less certain, this may be part of what you lived through.

Emotional abuse

Emotional abuse is perhaps the hardest form of toxicity to name, because it leaves no visible marks and because the person experiencing it is often convinced — frequently by the abuser — that they are the problem. It includes sustained criticism, contempt, humiliation, dismissal of feelings, and the consistent communication — overt or implied — that the other person is inadequate, oversensitive, or fundamentally flawed.

One of the most important things I can tell you about emotional abuse is this: you do not have to have been shouted at or called names for this to apply to you. Emotional abuse can be delivered quietly, with a sigh, a look, a withdrawal of warmth, a persistent low-level atmosphere of disappointment. It can be so subtle that the person experiencing it spends years wondering if they are imagining it.

You were not imagining it.

Gaslighting

Gaslighting is a specific and particularly destabilising feature of many toxic relationships. The term — which has its origins in a 1944 film — describes the process by which one person causes another to question their own perceptions, memories, and sanity. In practice it

can sound like: "That never happened." "You're being ridiculous." "You're too sensitive." "I never said that." "You always do this."

The cumulative effect of gaslighting is a profound disconnection from your own inner experience. If every time you named something you felt, or something you saw, you were told you were wrong — that you misremembered, misunderstood, overreacted — eventually you stop trusting yourself. This is not a character flaw. It is a completely predictable response to sustained reality distortion.

The restoration of trust in your own perceptions is one of the most important pieces of recovery work there is. We will return to it throughout this book.

Intermittent reinforcement

This is one of the least discussed but most powerful features of toxic relationships, and understanding it can do a great deal to dissolve the shame many people carry about why they stayed.

Intermittent reinforcement is a pattern in which reward — warmth, affection, approval, connection — is given unpredictably and inconsistently. Sometimes the relationship feels wonderful. Sometimes it feels frightening or cold. The unpredictability itself is what creates the powerful psychological pull. Research in behavioural psychology has consistently shown that intermittent reinforcement produces stronger

attachment and greater persistence than consistent reward. In plain terms: being sometimes loved and sometimes frightened binds a person more powerfully than being consistently loved.

This is not a weakness. It is how the human nervous system works. If you stayed longer than you think you should have, if you kept going back, if you found the relationship impossible to leave even when part of you knew you needed to — intermittent reinforcement is very likely part of the reason why.

Contempt and chronic criticism

Relationship researcher Dr John Gottman identified contempt — the consistent communication that your partner is inferior, worthless, or beneath you — as the single most reliable predictor of relationship breakdown. In toxic relationships, contempt is often pervasive. It shows up as eye-rolling, dismissiveness, mockery, and the sustained message that your feelings, needs, opinions and very presence are somehow too much, not enough, or simply inconvenient.

Chronic criticism — the persistent focus on your faults and failures, with little or no acknowledgement of your strengths — works in a similar way. Over time it reshapes how you see yourself, until the critical voice of the relationship becomes indistinguishable from your own inner voice.

One of the goals of this book is to help you hear the difference.

The confusion of love and pain

One of the reasons toxic relationships are so hard to leave — and so hard to grieve properly once you have — is that the love in them was often real. The connection you felt was not an illusion. The moments of warmth, of being known, of feeling that this person understood you in ways others did not — those moments happened. They were real. And losing them, even when leaving was right and necessary, is a genuine loss that deserves to be acknowledged as such.

What made the relationship toxic was not that the love was false. It was that the love was conditional, inconsistent, or ultimately outweighed by the harm. You can grieve what was good in a relationship while also being clear about what made it harmful. These are not contradictory positions. They are both true at once, and holding both of them is part of what recovery asks of you.

A word about severity

Throughout this chapter I have tried to describe a range of experiences, from the more subtle to the more severe. I want to say clearly: you do not need to have

experienced the most extreme end of this spectrum for your experience to count, for your pain to be real, or for this book to be written for you.

I have sat with people who left relationships involving serious physical danger, and I have sat with people who left relationships that looked entirely respectable from the outside — where the damage was done so quietly that even they were not sure, for a long time, that anything wrong had happened at all. Both groups needed the same things: to be believed, to understand what had happened to them, and to find their way back to themselves.

If you are reading this and wondering whether your experience was bad enough to count — it was. The fact that you are here, asking these questions, is enough.

Naming it is the first act of freedom

There is something that happens when people are finally able to name what they lived through. Not a dramatic moment of revelation, usually — more like a quiet settling. A sense that the ground beneath them is slightly more solid than it was before. What they experienced had a shape. It had a name. They were not imagining it, they were not too sensitive, they were not the cause of it.

That is where we begin.

In the next chapter we will look at something that can feel confronting at first but which I have seen bring profound relief to many people: the role of the drama triangle — the relational pattern that keeps people locked inside toxic dynamics long after part of them knows they need to leave.

But before we move on, I would like to offer you a short reflection exercise. You do not have to complete it now. You can return to it whenever feels right.

Reflection — Chapter One

Find somewhere quiet. Take a few slow breaths and allow yourself to arrive in the present moment before you begin.

Consider the relationship you have come through. Without pressure to label or judge, simply notice what comes up as you sit with the following questions. You may want to write your responses in a journal.

- Which of the patterns described in this chapter felt familiar to you? Take your time with this — there is no right answer and no score.
- Was there a moment when you first sensed something was wrong — before you had words for it? What did that feel like in your body?
- What did you tell yourself at the time to make sense of what was happening?
- What do you understand now that you did not understand then?

There is no need to analyse your answers or reach any conclusions. Simply notice what is there. Awareness, without judgment, is itself a form of healing.

A clinical note: if reading this chapter has brought up strong feelings or distressing memories, please take your time. This material asks something of you emotionally and there is no need to rush. If you find yourself significantly distressed, please consider reaching out to a qualified therapist or counsellor. Working through this kind of material in a supported therapeutic space can make a significant difference.

Naming what happened is the first act of reclaiming your story. The Talk & Love™ *Back to Dating Hub* is there when you are ready for the next one.

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Chapter Two

The Drama Triangle — Were You Living in It?

There is a particular kind of exhaustion that comes from a toxic relationship — one that goes beyond ordinary tiredness. It is the exhaustion of someone who has been working very hard, for a very long time, at something that could never quite be solved. If you recognise that feeling — the sense of having poured enormous energy into managing, appeasing, rescuing, or defending — this chapter may help explain why.

In 1968, psychiatrist and Transactional Analysis theorist Dr Stephen Karpman published a short paper that described something he had observed in the psychological patterns of fairy tales — and recognised immediately in the dynamics of troubled human relationships. He called it the Drama Triangle. More than fifty years later it remains one of the most illuminating frameworks I know for understanding why toxic relationships feel the way they do from the inside, and why they are so remarkably difficult to leave.

This chapter introduces the Drama Triangle and asks you to look, honestly and without self-blame, at the role — or roles — you may have played within it.

The three positions

Karpman identified three roles that people occupy in dramatic, high-conflict relational dynamics. He called them the Persecutor, the Rescuer, and the Victim. Each role has its own logic, its own emotional payoff, and its own cost. And crucially — as we will see — they are not fixed. People move between them, sometimes within a single conversation.

The Persecutor

The Persecutor is the role associated with criticism, control, blame and attack. In a toxic relationship the Persecutor position is characterised by behaviour that diminishes, punishes, or dominates the other person — whether through overt aggression or the quieter, colder forms of control described in Chapter One.

It is important to understand that Persecutor behaviour is almost always driven by fear — fear of losing control, fear of vulnerability, fear of being exposed as inadequate. This does not excuse it. But it helps explain it. The person in the Persecutor position

is not usually someone who feels powerful. They are someone who feels deeply unsafe and has learned that attack is the best form of defence.

In toxic relationships, one person may occupy the Persecutor role more consistently than the other. But as we will see, roles shift — and a person who presents primarily as a Victim can move into Persecutor behaviour, and vice versa.

The Victim

In Karpman's framework, the Victim position is not the same as genuinely being victimised — though the two can overlap. The Victim role is characterised by a sense of helplessness, powerlessness, and the belief that one cannot change one's circumstances or take responsibility for one's own experience. In this role, a person feels that things happen to them rather than being shaped by their own choices and agency.

I want to be careful here, because this requires a distinction that is easy to misread. If you were in a relationship where you were genuinely harmed — controlled, abused, manipulated — then you were, in a real and important sense, a victim of that behaviour. That is true and it deserves to be acknowledged without qualification.

What Karpman is describing is something slightly different: a psychological position — a habitual way of experiencing oneself in relation to others — that can

persist beyond the circumstances that originally produced it. A person can be genuinely harmed and also, over time, develop a way of relating to the world that keeps them feeling powerless even when the original source of harm is gone. Understanding this is not about blame. It is about agency — and the possibility of reclaiming it.

The Rescuer

The Rescuer is perhaps the most seductive role of the three — and the one that is hardest for many people to recognise in themselves, because it feels like love.

The Rescuer helps, fixes, manages, soothes and takes care of. They anticipate the needs of others and meet them before being asked. They carry more than their share. They make themselves indispensable. And crucially — the Rescuer's sense of self-worth is deeply tied to being needed. When they are helping, they feel valuable. When there is nothing to fix, they feel lost.

In a toxic relationship, the Rescuer often believes that if they could just help enough — be patient enough, loving enough, understanding enough — the relationship would heal. They stay because leaving feels like abandonment. They give more when the relationship takes more. And they tend to attract — or be attracted to — people who need rescuing.

This is not a character flaw. It is almost always the echo of something learned earlier in life — a role taken on in childhood, in a family system where emotional caretaking felt necessary for safety or love. We will return to the roots of these patterns when we explore attachment in the next chapter.

How the triangle moves

What makes the Drama Triangle so powerful — and so exhausting — is that it is not static. The roles rotate. And the rotation happens so quickly, and so naturally, that the people inside it often do not notice it is happening at all.

A common pattern in a toxic relationship might look something like this. The Persecutor criticises or attacks — moving from a place of fear into aggression. The other person, hurt and overwhelmed, moves into the Victim position. Then the Persecutor, perhaps feeling guilt or fear of abandonment, moves into the Rescuer role — apologising, making grand gestures, being suddenly warm and attentive. The person who was in the Victim position now feels rescued and cared for, and the relationship briefly feels good again.

Until the cycle begins again.

This rotation — attack, remorse, warmth, honeymoon, tension, attack — is the structure beneath what in Chapter One we called intermittent

reinforcement. The unpredictability is not random. It has a shape. And once you can see the shape, you can begin to step outside it.

The role you played

I want to ask you to do something that may feel uncomfortable. I want to ask you to consider, honestly, which role or roles you occupied in your relationship — and whether you moved between them.

Most people reading this book will recognise themselves primarily in the Victim and Rescuer positions. You may have been on the receiving end of Persecutor behaviour, and you may also have spent enormous energy trying to fix, manage and care for a person who hurt you. Both of these things can be true simultaneously.

But some readers may also recognise moments when they themselves moved into Persecutor behaviour — perhaps in response to accumulated pain, perhaps in an attempt to finally be heard, perhaps because the dynamic of the relationship eventually pulled behaviour out of them that they did not recognise as their own. If this is you, I want to say clearly: recognising this is not the same as accepting blame for what was done to you. It is simply part of seeing the whole picture — and the whole picture is what gives you the most freedom going forward.

The triangle and why you stayed

Understanding the Drama Triangle dissolves a question that haunts many survivors of toxic relationships: why did I stay so long?

If you were primarily in the Rescuer role, you stayed because leaving felt like giving up on someone who needed you. Because you believed, deeply, that if you could find the right way to love them it would be enough. Because your own sense of worth was so tied to being needed that leaving felt like losing yourself.

If you were primarily in the Victim role, you stayed because the role of Victim — though painful — can also feel familiar and in a strange way safe. It is a position that does not require you to take risks, make demands, or hold people accountable. And if you grew up in an environment where powerlessness was the safest available response, it may be the position your nervous system returns to under stress.

If you moved between roles — as most people in toxic relationships do — you stayed because the triangle itself is compelling. The drama, the intensity, the cycle of rupture and repair, creates a kind of aliveness that can feel, from the inside, like passion. Like love. Stepping outside it can feel, at first, like stepping into emptiness.

That emptiness, as we will discover, is not emptiness at all. It is space. And it is where something new can begin.

The compassion triangle — the healthy alternative

Karpman himself, in his later work, identified what he called the Compassion Triangle — the healthy counterpart to the drama version. In the Compassion Triangle, the Persecutor role is replaced by the Assertive position — someone who can be direct, honest and boundaried without attacking. The Rescuer role is replaced by the Caring position — someone who offers support without needing to be needed, and who helps without removing the other person's agency. And the Victim role is replaced by the Vulnerable position — someone who can acknowledge difficulty and ask for help without collapsing into helplessness.

These are not just relationship ideals. They are capacities that can be developed — through exactly the kind of work this book invites you into. By the time we reach Part Four, you will have a much clearer sense of what it feels like to stand in the Compassion Triangle rather than the Drama Triangle. And you will have the tools to stay there.

You were not weak. You were in a system.

I want to close this chapter with something I say often in the therapy room, because I have watched it land with real relief for many people: the Drama Triangle is a system. And systems have a gravitational pull that is far stronger than individual willpower.

You did not stay because you were weak, or stupid, or lacking in self-respect. You stayed because you were inside a powerful relational system that had its own momentum, its own logic, and its own rewards — however painful and transient those rewards were. Understanding that system is not about excusing what happened. It is about giving yourself the honest account of events that you deserve.

In the next chapter we will go one layer deeper — into the attachment patterns that made the Drama Triangle feel so familiar, and so hard to resist.

Reflection — Chapter Two

Take a few moments to settle before you begin. Breathe slowly. Allow yourself to be present with whatever this chapter has brought up.

In your journal, or simply in your own mind, sit with the following questions:

- Which of the three roles — Persecutor, Rescuer, Victim — did you find yourself in most often in your relationship? Did you move between roles? If so, what seemed to trigger the shifts?
- If you were primarily in the Rescuer role: what did helping or fixing give you? What did you fear would happen if you stopped?
- If you were primarily in the Victim role: what felt familiar about powerlessness? Where else in your life have you felt this way?
- Can you identify the cycle of your relationship — the pattern of rupture, repair, warmth, tension, rupture? How long did each phase typically last?
- Looking at the Compassion Triangle — Assertive, Caring, Vulnerable — which of these capacities feels most available to

you right now? Which feels most out of reach?

As always, there are no right answers. Simply notice what is true for you, with as much compassion for yourself as you can manage.

A note on TA: Transactional Analysis is a rich and well-developed psychological framework with a wide body of clinical literature. If you find the Drama Triangle concept particularly resonant, Eric Berne's Games People Play (1964) and Stephen Karpman's A Game Free Life (2014) are both readable and worthwhile. Full references are provided at the end of this book.

Understanding the patterns that kept you there is not blame — it is freedom. The Talk & Love™ *Back to Dating Hub* is there when you are ready to move forward.

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Chapter Three

Your Attachment Style and Why You Stayed

Long before you met the person who hurt you, you were already learning how love works. You were learning it in the earliest relationships of your life — with the people who cared for you, or tried to, or failed to. You were learning what to expect from closeness, what to do when you needed comfort, whether other people could be trusted to stay. You were learning, without words and without awareness, what love feels like in the body.

That learning shaped everything that came after — including why you entered the relationship you did, how you behaved inside it, and why leaving was so much harder than it seemed like it should be.

This chapter is about attachment — one of the most profound and well-evidenced frameworks in all of psychology for understanding human connection. It is also, in my experience, one of the most relieving. Because when people understand their attachment style, something that previously felt like a personal

failing — staying too long, loving too hard, needing too much, shutting down when they most needed to open — begins to make complete sense.

Where attachment theory begins

Attachment theory was developed by the British psychiatrist John Bowlby in the 1960s and 1970s. Bowlby proposed something that was, at the time, genuinely radical: that the human infant's need for a close, consistent relationship with a caregiver is not merely a preference or a comfort — it is a biological necessity, as fundamental as the need for food or warmth. He called this the attachment system, and he argued that it remains active throughout our entire lives.

The attachment system has one primary purpose: to keep us safe by keeping us close to people we can depend on. When we sense threat — physical danger, emotional overwhelm, loss — the attachment system activates. We seek proximity to someone who can regulate us, soothe us, help us feel safe again. Bowlby called this person the attachment figure, and he described two key functions they serve: the safe haven — a source of comfort when we are distressed — and the secure base — a foundation from which we can explore the world with confidence.

When those needs are consistently met in early life, we develop what researchers call secure attachment. When they are not — when the caregiver is inconsistent, unavailable, frightening, or absent — we develop one of several insecure attachment patterns as an adaptive response. These patterns are not weaknesses. They are intelligent solutions to the relational environment we grew up in. The problem is that we carry them forward into adult relationships, where the original environment no longer applies.

The four attachment styles

Researcher Mary Ainsworth, building on Bowlby's foundations, identified three primary attachment patterns in children through her landmark Strange Situation studies in the 1970s. A fourth pattern — disorganised attachment — was later identified by Mary Main and Judith Hesse. In adult relationships these four patterns show up in recognisable and consistent ways.

Secure attachment

Securely attached people are comfortable with closeness and do not fear abandonment or engulfment. They can ask for what they need, tolerate disagreement without it feeling catastrophic, and trust that relationships can survive difficulty and repair.

They are not perfect — they feel hurt, they get angry, they have moments of doubt — but their underlying sense of themselves in relationship is one of basic worthiness and trust.

If you are reading this book, secure attachment may not be your primary pattern — though it is worth knowing that security is not fixed. It can be developed, earned through experience and through exactly the kind of self-understanding this book invites. We will return to this idea of earned secure attachment in Part Four.

Anxious attachment

Anxious attachment develops when early caregiving was inconsistent — sometimes warm and responsive, sometimes unavailable or preoccupied. The child learns that love is available but unreliable, and responds by turning up the volume on their attachment signals — becoming more clingy, more vigilant, more distressed by any hint of distance or withdrawal. The underlying strategy is: if I signal loudly enough, persistently enough, I will get the closeness I need.

In adult relationships, anxious attachment shows up as a heightened sensitivity to any sign of rejection or withdrawal. A delayed text message can feel like abandonment. A partner's bad mood can feel like a signal that the relationship is ending. There is often a preoccupation with the relationship — a difficulty

thinking about much else when things feel uncertain — and a tendency to seek reassurance frequently, only to find that the reassurance never quite settles the anxiety for long.

Anxiously attached people often describe feeling too much — too needy, too sensitive, too intense. This self-assessment is almost always learned rather than true. What they are actually experiencing is an attachment system that has been calibrated by early experience to stay on high alert for the possibility of loss.

In a toxic relationship characterised by intermittent reinforcement — as described in Chapter One — anxious attachment is powerfully activated. The unpredictability of the relationship is, in a terrible way, entirely familiar. It matches the internal working model developed in childhood. And the moments of warmth and connection, when they come, produce an intensity of relief and belonging that is deeply reinforcing. This is a significant part of why people with anxious attachment find toxic relationships so extraordinarily hard to leave.

Avoidant attachment

Avoidant attachment develops when early caregiving was consistently emotionally unavailable — not necessarily cold or cruel, but simply not attuned to the child's emotional needs. The child learns that expressing attachment needs does not bring comfort,

and adapts by suppressing those needs — becoming self-reliant, emotionally self-contained, and uncomfortable with dependency in either direction.

In adult relationships, avoidant attachment shows up as a discomfort with emotional closeness, a tendency to withdraw when things become intense, difficulty expressing vulnerability, and a strong pull toward independence. Avoidantly attached people are not unfeeling — their feelings are very much present, but they have learned that feelings, particularly attachment feelings, are not safe to show.

In a toxic relationship, avoidant attachment can manifest in ways that are confusing to both people involved. The avoidant person may genuinely want connection while simultaneously pulling back from it. They may appear cold or indifferent when they are in fact overwhelmed. And their withdrawal — which to the anxiously attached partner feels like rejection — may trigger exactly the kind of escalating pursuit that confirms the avoidant person's discomfort with intimacy.

This pursue-withdraw dynamic — the anxious partner moving toward, the avoidant partner pulling back — is one of the most common and painful patterns in troubled relationships. It is also one of the central patterns addressed by Emotionally Focused Therapy, which we will draw on extensively in Part Five of this book.

Disorganised attachment

Disorganised attachment — identified by researchers Mary Main and Judith Hesse — is the pattern most closely associated with early experiences of fear, abuse, or profound neglect. It develops when the caregiver is simultaneously the source of comfort and the source of threat — when the very person the child needs to run to for safety is also someone they need to run from.

This creates an impossible bind. The attachment system activates under threat and drives the child toward the attachment figure — but the attachment figure is the threat. There is no coherent strategy available, and the result is a disorganised, contradictory pattern of behaviour in relationships: simultaneously craving closeness and fearing it, moving toward people and then pushing them away, feeling most frightened by the people they most need.

Disorganised attachment is strongly associated with the experience of toxic relationships — both in terms of being more vulnerable to entering them and in terms of the particular intensity of the bond that forms within them. If this pattern resonates with you, I want to say clearly: it is the most understandable response imaginable to an impossible early situation. And it is also the pattern that responds most profoundly to good therapeutic work.

Trauma bonding — why the bond feels unbreakable

Alongside attachment style, there is another mechanism that helps explain why leaving a toxic relationship can feel not just difficult but almost physically impossible. It is called trauma bonding.

Trauma bonding is a psychological response that develops in relationships characterised by cycles of abuse and intermittent positive reinforcement. It was first described by researcher Patrick Carnes, who observed that people in abusive relationships often develop a powerful, compulsive attachment to the person harming them — an attachment that feels as real and as deep as any love they have ever known, and that persists long after the relationship ends.

The mechanism is partly neurobiological. The cycle of threat, relief, and reward that characterises a toxic relationship activates the brain's stress and reward systems in ways that produce a powerful chemical bond. Cortisol rises during the frightening phases. Dopamine and oxytocin flood the system during the moments of warmth and reconnection. The brain, attempting to make sense of this, begins to associate the person with both threat and reward — and the wanting, the longing, the inability to stop thinking about them, is in part a neurological response to that pairing.

Understanding this does not make the bond less real. It does make it less mysterious — and less shameful. You were not weak. You were not stupid. You were biologically bonded to someone in a way that your nervous system experienced as attachment to a survival figure. Leaving, for your nervous system, felt like a threat to survival itself.

Staying was not weakness. It was attachment doing exactly what it was designed to do — keeping you close to the person your system had identified as essential to your survival. The work now is to help your system learn that it was wrong about that — gently, patiently, and with great compassion for the part of you that tried so hard to make it work.

Your attachment history is not your destiny

I want to close this chapter with something that I consider the most important idea in attachment theory — and one that is not always given the prominence it deserves.

Attachment patterns are not fixed. They are not hard-wired into your personality in a way that cannot change. They are learned responses to early relational

environments — and because they were learned, they can be unlearned, revised, and replaced with something more functional and more nourishing.

Researchers use the term earned secure attachment to describe the process by which people who did not receive secure attachment in childhood develop it through later relational experiences — through therapy, through consistently safe and attuned relationships, through the kind of self-understanding that you are building right now by reading this book.

This is not a quick process. It is not achieved through insight alone. It requires the kind of repeated, embodied, relational experience that allows the nervous system — not just the thinking mind — to learn that safety is possible. But it is entirely possible. I have watched it happen, slowly and genuinely, in hundreds of people over twenty years of practice.

You are not condemned to repeat what you have known. You are capable of something different. And the work of becoming capable of it begins here — with understanding where your patterns come from, and why they made such perfect sense given what you learned about love before you were old enough to choose.

In Part Two, we turn from the story of what happened to the body that lived through it — and begin the work of bringing your nervous system back to safety.

Reflection — Chapter Three

Take your time settling before you begin. This chapter asks something significant of you emotionally, and it is worth giving yourself a few quiet moments before moving into the reflection.

In your journal, or simply in quiet contemplation, sit with the following questions:

- Which attachment style felt most familiar as you read this chapter — anxious, avoidant, disorganised, or a mixture? What in your early life might have shaped that pattern?
- How did your attachment style show up in your relationship? Can you see the ways it may have kept you connected to someone who was not safe for you?
- Does the concept of trauma bonding resonate with your experience? If so, what does it feel like to understand the bond in this way — as a neurobiological response rather than a personal failing?
- Who was your earliest attachment figure? What did they teach you, through their presence or absence, about whether you could depend on the people you loved?

- What would earned secure attachment look, feel and sound like in your life? Allow yourself to imagine it, even if it feels distant.

Be gentle with yourself as you sit with these questions. What emerges may be tender. It is allowed to be.

*A note on attachment: the foundational texts here are John Bowlby's *A Secure Base* (1988) and Mary Ainsworth et al., *Patterns of Attachment* (1978). For accessible reading on adult attachment, Sue Johnson's *Hold Me Tight* (2008) is warmly recommended. Full references are provided at the end of this book.*

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Part Two — Student

Understanding Your Body

Part Two covers Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7. Its purpose is to help you understand what happened in your body during and after the toxic relationship — and to begin, gently and practically, the work of bringing your nervous system back to safety. Understanding comes before change. This part of the book asks you to become a curious and compassionate student of your own physiology.

Chapter Four

Your Nervous System Has Been on Red Alert

You may have noticed, since leaving the relationship, that you do not feel entirely safe — even when nothing threatening is actually happening. You might startle easily. You might find yourself scanning rooms, conversations, new people, for signs of danger. You might feel a tightness in your chest when someone you care about seems quiet or distant. You might struggle to relax even in circumstances that are, objectively, calm.

This is not anxiety in the ordinary sense. It is not a personality trait, and it is not a sign that something is fundamentally wrong with you. It is your nervous system doing exactly what it learned to do — keeping you safe in an environment that was genuinely unpredictable and sometimes frightening. The problem is that the environment has changed, but your nervous system has not yet received that information.

This chapter explains why — and begins the process of updating the alarm.

The science behind the feeling — an introduction to Polyvagal Theory

To understand what has happened in your body, we need to spend a little time with some neuroscience. I want to reassure you that this will be kept as accessible as possible — my biology training has given me a deep respect for this material, but also a conviction that it only becomes truly useful when it is translated into plain human terms.

In the 1990s, neuroscientist Dr Stephen Porges developed what he called Polyvagal Theory — a framework for understanding how the autonomic nervous system responds to threat and safety. It is one of the most clinically significant developments in trauma science of the past thirty years, and it explains, with extraordinary precision, much of what you have been experiencing.

The autonomic nervous system — the part of your nervous system that operates largely below conscious awareness — governs your heart rate, breathing, digestion, and your capacity for social connection. Porges identified three distinct states within this system, each associated with a different set of physiological responses and a different quality of lived experience.

State one — ventral vagal: safety and social connection

The first state is what Porges calls the ventral vagal state — named after the ventral branch of the vagus nerve, which runs from the brainstem down through the heart, lungs and digestive system. When you are in this state, your nervous system has assessed the environment as safe. Your heart rate is steady, your breathing is easy, your facial muscles are relaxed and expressive, your voice has natural prosody and warmth. You can think clearly, connect genuinely, feel curiosity and playfulness. You can be present.

This is the state associated with secure attachment, genuine intimacy, and the kind of grounded, open engagement with life that we are working toward throughout this book. It is also, for many survivors of toxic relationships, a state that has felt inaccessible for a very long time.

State two — sympathetic activation: fight or flight

When the nervous system detects threat — or what it perceives as threat — it mobilises. The sympathetic nervous system activates. Stress hormones flood the body. Heart rate increases, breathing becomes shallower and faster, muscles tense, digestion slows, and the social engagement system shuts down. The body is preparing to fight or flee.

In this state, nuanced thinking becomes difficult. The prefrontal cortex — the part of the brain responsible for reason, perspective-taking, and measured response — goes partially offline. What comes online instead is a more primitive, faster, survival-oriented system. You may feel anxious, agitated, hypervigilant, reactive, or unable to settle. You may find yourself scanning for danger even when none is present. You may say things you later regret, or feel emotions with an intensity that seems disproportionate to the circumstances.

If you lived for months or years inside a relationship where threat — real or anticipated — was a constant background presence, your sympathetic nervous system has been in sustained activation. It has learned to stay on. The body does not easily distinguish between the threat being present and the threat being merely possible. So it stays ready. Just in case.

State three — dorsal vagal: shutdown and freeze

The third state is the most ancient in evolutionary terms — the dorsal vagal state, associated with shutdown, freeze, and collapse. When the nervous system has assessed that the threat is inescapable — that neither fighting nor fleeing will produce safety — it moves into a conservation response. Heart rate drops, the body goes still, emotional numbness

descends, dissociation may occur. In extreme cases a person may feel completely disconnected from their body and their experience.

You may recognise this state from moments in your relationship when you simply went blank — when you stopped feeling, stopped responding, seemed to disappear inside yourself. This was not weakness or passive acceptance. It was your nervous system deploying its oldest and deepest protective mechanism: if you cannot escape the threat, become as small and still as possible.

Many survivors of toxic relationships move between sympathetic activation and dorsal vagal shutdown — swinging between agitation and numbness, between feeling too much and feeling nothing at all. This oscillation is exhausting, and it makes ordinary life — let alone the prospect of dating again — feel overwhelming.

Neuroception — why your body sounds the alarm before your mind knows why

One of Porges's most important contributions is the concept he calls neuroception — a term he coined to describe the nervous system's continuous, unconscious scanning of the environment for cues of safety or danger. Neuroception happens below the level of conscious awareness. Your nervous system is assessing

threat and safety constantly, drawing on information from your body, your surroundings, and the faces, voices and movements of the people around you — and it is doing this before your thinking mind has had any chance to weigh in.

This is why you might feel a sudden inexplicable anxiety when someone raises their voice slightly, even in a perfectly safe context. Why a certain tone of voice, a particular expression, a specific kind of silence, can send your system into high alert in a fraction of a second. Your neuroception has been trained by your experience of the toxic relationship to flag these cues as dangerous. It is not being irrational. It is being exactly as accurate as it learned to be.

The work of recovery, at this level, is the work of updating neuroception — of helping your nervous system learn, through repeated safe experience, that certain cues no longer mean what they once did. This is not primarily a cognitive process. It does not happen through thinking. It happens through the body, through relationship, through time, and through the specific practices we will explore in Chapters 5 and 6.

What chronic threat does to the body over time

Living inside a toxic relationship — where the nervous system is in sustained sympathetic activation, or cycling between activation and shutdown — has real physiological consequences. This is not metaphor. Chronic stress dysregulates the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, disrupts sleep, impairs immune function, affects digestion, and alters the structure and function of the brain itself — particularly the areas involved in emotional regulation, memory, and the assessment of threat.

Dr Bessel van der Kolk, whose research on trauma and the body has transformed the field, describes this with characteristic directness: the body keeps the score. The effects of sustained relational threat are not stored only in memory and narrative. They are stored in the muscles, the gut, the breath, the posture, the nervous system. They show up as physical symptoms — chronic tension, digestive problems, fatigue, a persistent sense of unease — that continue long after the relationship has ended.

I say this not to alarm you but to explain something important: the reason you cannot simply think your way out of how you feel. You cannot reason your nervous system into safety. The healing that needs to

happen is not only cognitive — it is somatic, embodied, physiological. The body that lived through this needs to be part of the recovery.

This is why Part Two of this book exists before Part Three. Understanding the mind — the core beliefs, the life positions, the narrative of what happened — is essential. But it has to be built on a foundation of physiological settling. A regulated nervous system is not a luxury on the way to healing. It is the precondition for it.

Your nervous system is not broken — it is brilliant

I want to close this chapter with something I say often, because I find it genuinely changes how people relate to their own symptoms.

Your nervous system is not broken. It is not malfunctioning. It is doing something extraordinarily sophisticated — it learned, in extraordinary detail, the specific cues that predicted danger in your particular relationship, and it has been protecting you from those cues ever since. The hypervigilance, the anxiety, the reactivity, the numbness — these are not failures of character or will. They are the evidence of a brilliantly adaptive system that kept you alive and functional through something genuinely threatening.

The task now is not to fix a broken system. It is to update an accurate one. To give your nervous system new information — that the threat has passed, that safety is possible, that not every silence is dangerous and not every raised voice is a precursor to harm.

Your body learned that love meant danger. Now, slowly and gently, it is being asked to learn something new. That learning takes time. It takes patience. And it takes exactly the kind of compassion for yourself that the toxic relationship made so hard to feel.

In the next chapter we will introduce the Window of Tolerance — a concept that will help you map your own nervous system states with precision and begin to understand what expanding your capacity for safety actually looks and feels like.

Reflection — Chapter Four

Before you begin, take a moment to arrive in your body. Feel the weight of yourself in your chair or wherever you are sitting. Take three slow breaths — not forced, simply allowing the exhale to be a little longer than the inhale. Notice any areas of tension without trying to change them.

In your journal, or in quiet reflection, consider the following:

- Which of the three nervous system states — ventral vagal safety, sympathetic activation, or dorsal vagal shutdown — feels most familiar to you right now? Which did you spend the most time in during your relationship?
- Can you identify specific triggers — tones of voice, silences, expressions, situations — that seem to activate your threat response even now, outside the relationship? What happens in your body when these triggers appear?
- Do you recognise the oscillation between agitation and numbness? What does each state feel like from the inside?

- What, if anything, helps you feel safer in your body? Even small things count — a warm drink, a particular piece of music, a certain quality of light, the presence of a specific person or animal.
- Can you bring any compassion to the nervous system that kept you alert for so long? What would you say to it, if you could?

There is no urgency here. Simply notice. Your awareness of these states is itself the beginning of working with them.

*A note on Polyvagal Theory: this chapter draws on the foundational work of Dr Stephen Porges, particularly *The Polyvagal Theory* (2011) and *The Pocket Guide to the Polyvagal Theory* (2017). For an accessible and deeply humane exploration of how trauma is held in the body, Dr Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014) is essential reading. Full references are provided at the end of this book.*

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Chapter Five

The Window of Tolerance and You

In Chapter 4 we mapped the three states of the nervous system — the safety of ventral vagal, the mobilised alertness of sympathetic activation, and the collapsed stillness of dorsal vagal shutdown. We established that living inside a toxic relationship tends to push the nervous system out of the first state and into the other two — sometimes for sustained periods, sometimes oscillating between them with exhausting unpredictability.

This chapter introduces a concept that builds directly on that foundation — one that I find consistently useful in clinical work because it is both scientifically grounded and immediately, practically applicable to everyday life. It is called the Window of Tolerance, and once you understand it, you will find yourself using it constantly — as a way of reading your own state, understanding your responses, and making better decisions about when you are truly ready for the demands that dating and new relationships will place on you.

What is the Window of Tolerance?

The Window of Tolerance is a concept developed by clinical professor and neuroscientist Dr Daniel Siegel. It describes the zone of nervous system arousal within which a person is able to function optimally — to think clearly, feel emotions without being overwhelmed by them, engage with other people, make considered decisions, and respond to challenge with flexibility rather than rigidity or collapse.

Imagine a vertical band running from low to high arousal. The window sits in the middle of that band. Within it, you have access to your full capacities — emotional, cognitive, relational. You can be moved without being swept away. You can engage with difficulty without shutting down. You can feel the full range of human emotion — including grief, anger, longing, fear — and remain, essentially, yourself.

Above the window is hyperarousal — the territory of the activated sympathetic nervous system described in Chapter 4. Here, arousal has exceeded what the system can process, and the result is anxiety, panic, hypervigilance, emotional flooding, reactive behaviour, racing thoughts, difficulty concentrating, and the feeling of being out of control. You may have noticed that when you are in this state, you say things you do not mean, make decisions you later regret, or find it impossible to access the calm, clear part of yourself that you know is there somewhere.

Below the window is hypoarousal — the territory of dorsal vagal shutdown. Here, arousal has dropped below the threshold needed for engagement, and the result is numbness, disconnection, flatness, fatigue, dissociation, the sense of watching yourself from a distance, and a difficulty feeling anything at all. When you are in this state, the world can feel unreal, your own emotions can feel inaccessible, and even simple tasks can feel impossibly heavy.

What a toxic relationship does to the window

In a nervous system shaped by secure attachment and relatively low levels of chronic threat, the window of tolerance tends to be reasonably wide. The person can handle a significant range of emotional intensity — moving in and out of more activated or more settled states — without losing their footing.

In a nervous system shaped by chronic relational threat — by the sustained unpredictability, hypervigilance, and emotional intensity of a toxic relationship — the window tends to narrow. The system has been repeatedly overwhelmed, and its threshold for dysregulation drops. What might be a manageable emotional event for someone with a wide window becomes intolerable for someone whose window has been compressed by sustained stress.

This is why, after a toxic relationship, relatively small things can send you into significant distress. A slightly sharp tone in a colleague's email. A friend who does not reply quickly. A date who seems momentarily distracted. These are not dramatic events — but to a narrowed window, they can feel like emergencies. Your system is not overreacting. It is operating exactly within its current capacity. The work of recovery is, in significant part, the work of widening that capacity again.

Recognising your own states

One of the most valuable things you can develop in your recovery is what I would call nervous system literacy — the ability to recognise, in real time, which state you are currently in. This sounds simple, but for many people who have lived through sustained relational threat, the connection between what is happening in the body and what is being experienced consciously has become disrupted. You may have learned to override your body's signals so thoroughly that you genuinely cannot tell, from the inside, whether you are within your window or well outside it.

The following descriptions may help you begin to map your own experience.

Signs you are within your window

When you are within your window of tolerance, you may notice: a sense of relative ease in your body, even if things are not perfect; the ability to think about difficult things without being overwhelmed by them; genuine curiosity about other people and the world; the capacity to feel emotion and then let it move through you; the ability to disagree or hold a difficult conversation without it feeling catastrophic; a quality of presence — of actually being here, rather than monitoring from a distance.

Signs you are above your window — hyperarousal

When you have moved above your window, you may notice: a racing heart or tightness in the chest; shallow, rapid breathing; a sense of urgency or panic that does not quite match the situation; intrusive thoughts that are difficult to interrupt; a heightened sensitivity to other people's moods and behaviour; the urge to seek reassurance, to fix something, to act immediately; an inability to hear reassurance even when it is offered; a feeling of being out of control or on the edge of something.

Signs you are below your window — hypoarousal

When you have moved below your window, you may notice: a sense of flatness or emptiness; difficulty feeling emotions that you know intellectually should be there; a heaviness in the body, as though moving through water; reduced speech and expressiveness; a disconnection from your surroundings or from your own experience; difficulty making decisions or caring about outcomes; the sense of watching yourself from a slight distance, as though behind glass.

The window and dating

I want to spend a moment on something that is directly relevant to the later parts of this book — the relationship between your window of tolerance and your readiness to date again.

Dating, by its nature, is activating. It involves uncertainty, evaluation, vulnerability, the risk of rejection, the possibility of connection, and the constant negotiation of self-revelation and self-protection. For someone with a wide window operating from a regulated nervous system, this activation is manageable — even enjoyable. It is the pleasant tension of new possibility.

For someone whose window has been significantly narrowed by the experience of a toxic relationship, the same activation can push the system outside its

window almost immediately. The result can be anxiety that feels disproportionate, emotional reactions that seem too large for the situation, or a shutting down that makes genuine connection feel impossible.

This is not a sign that you are not ready to be loved, or that you are too damaged to date. It is a sign that your window needs some tending before you ask it to hold the demands of early intimacy. This is not a delay — it is an investment. The person who steps back into dating from within their window makes fundamentally different choices, has fundamentally different experiences, and is able to be fundamentally more themselves than the person who steps back into dating from a state of chronic dysregulation.

You cannot choose wisely from outside your window. Not because your judgement is poor, but because the nervous system state you are making decisions from profoundly shapes what feels attractive, what feels safe, and what kind of connection you are able to receive.

The window is not fixed

Perhaps the most important thing to understand about the window of tolerance is that it is not a fixed measurement. It is a dynamic capacity that can be expanded — through the practices we will explore in

Chapter 6, through the therapeutic work of building emotional regulation skills, through safe and attuned relationships, and through time.

A window that has been narrowed by years of relational threat can widen again. The nervous system is plastic — it changes in response to experience. Every moment of genuine safety, every successful return from dysregulation, every practice of regulation that works, is an increment of expansion. Small, patient, cumulative — but real.

In my clinical experience, people are consistently surprised by how quickly the window begins to widen once they understand what they are working with and begin working with it deliberately. Not overnight, and not without difficulty — but with a clarity and a direction that makes the effort feel purposeful rather than hopeless.

Chapter 6 offers a practical toolkit of somatic and breathing practices specifically designed to help you work with your window — to return to it when you have left it, and to gradually expand it over time. But before we move there, the most valuable thing you can do is simply to begin noticing. To start developing that nervous system literacy — the quiet, non-judgmental awareness of where you are right now, in your body, in this moment.

That awareness is itself a form of regulation. And it is where everything else begins.

Reflection and Practice — Chapter Five

This chapter's exercise has two parts — a reflection and a brief body-based practice. Take your time with both.

Part One — Mapping your window

In your journal, create a simple map of your own window of tolerance. You do not need to draw anything elaborate — simply note, in your own words, what each state feels like for you specifically.

- What does hyperarousal feel like in your body? Where do you feel it? What are your early warning signs that you are moving above your window?
- What does hypoarousal feel like for you? How do you know when you have moved below your window? What are the first signs?
- What does being within your window feel like? Can you recall a recent moment — however brief — when you felt genuinely settled and present? What were the conditions that made that possible?

Part Two — A brief orienting practice

This is a simple practice drawn from somatic therapy that helps the nervous system register the present moment as distinct from the past threat.

Sit comfortably and allow your gaze to be soft — not staring, simply resting. Slowly turn your head and let your eyes move around the room. Notice five things you can see. Notice whether any of them carry a sense of ease or interest — a quality of light, a colour, a texture. Pause on anything that feels in any way pleasant or neutral, allowing your gaze to rest there for a breath or two.

Now notice three things you can hear. Three things you can feel in contact with your body — the chair beneath you, the temperature of the air, the fabric of your clothing.

This practice is called orienting. Its purpose is to help your nervous system register the present environment — this room, this moment, this safety — rather than continuing to scan for a threat that is no longer here. It takes less than two minutes and can be used anywhere, at any time, as a way of returning yourself to your window.

Notice what, if anything, shifts as you do it. There is no right response — simply observe.

A note on the Window of Tolerance: this concept originates in the work of Dr Daniel Siegel, first described in The Developing Mind (1999) and developed further in Mindsight (2010). The orienting practice in this chapter's exercise draws on principles from Peter Levine's Somatic Experiencing approach, described in Waking the Tiger (1997) and In an Unspoken Voice (2010). Full references are provided at the end of this book.

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Chapter Six

Learning to Feel Safe in Your Own Body Again

The previous two chapters were about understanding — about mapping the nervous system states you have been living in and developing the literacy to recognise where you are at any given moment. This chapter is different. This chapter is about doing.

The practices offered here are not relaxation techniques, though some of them may produce relaxation as a side effect. They are not positive thinking exercises or ways of convincing yourself that everything is fine. They are specific, evidence-informed tools for working directly with the nervous system — for sending it the signals it needs in order to begin, slowly and genuinely, to shift its assessment of the world from dangerous to safe.

Some of these practices will feel immediately useful. Others may feel awkward or produce little at first. Both responses are fine. The nervous system does not change quickly, and it does not change through effort alone. What changes it is repetition — small,

consistent, patient practice over time. Think of this chapter not as a set of techniques to master but as a menu to explore. You will find what works for your particular body and your particular nervous system. Trust that process.

A note on titration

Before we begin, I want to introduce a concept from Peter Levine's Somatic Experiencing approach that is important for working safely with this material. It is called titration — the practice of approaching difficult or activating material in small, manageable doses rather than all at once.

In chemistry, titration means adding one substance to another drop by drop, carefully controlling the amount to avoid an overwhelming reaction. In somatic work it means the same thing: we do not dive into the most activating material immediately. We approach it gradually, building capacity and resource as we go, retreating when needed, and never pushing the nervous system further than it can currently hold.

If any of the practices in this chapter feel too activating — if they increase anxiety, produce dissociation, or feel in any way unsafe — please stop, return to something grounding and familiar, and consider working with these practices alongside a qualified therapist. This is not failure. It is titration. It is the right approach.

The vagus nerve — your body's pathway to safety

At the heart of the practices in this chapter is the vagus nerve — the longest cranial nerve in the body, running from the brainstem down through the face, throat, heart, lungs and gut. As we explored in Chapter 4, it is the vagus nerve — specifically its ventral branch — that carries the signals of social safety and settled connection. Stimulating the vagus nerve gently and consistently is one of the most direct ways available to us of shifting the nervous system toward the ventral vagal state — toward ease, openness, and the capacity for genuine connection.

The vagus nerve is bidirectional. It carries information both from the brain to the body and from the body to the brain. This is significant because it means we can influence the brain's assessment of safety by changing what we do in the body. We do not have to wait for our thoughts to change before our nervous system settles. We can work from the bottom up — using breath, movement, sound, and touch to send safety signals directly through the vagal pathway.

Practice one — extended exhale breathing

Of all the practices available for working with the nervous system, conscious breathing is the most accessible and one of the most effective. This is because breath is the one autonomic process that is also under voluntary control — it operates automatically, but we can also choose to intervene in it. And when we do, we directly influence heart rate, blood pressure, and the balance between sympathetic and parasympathetic activity.

The specific quality of breath that activates the vagus nerve and shifts the nervous system toward parasympathetic dominance is a longer exhale than inhale. When we exhale, heart rate slows slightly. When we inhale, it speeds up slightly. By extending the exhale, we spend more time in the heart-rate-slowng phase — and this is directly calming to the nervous system.

Extended Exhale Practice

Sit comfortably with your feet on the floor and your spine reasonably upright. Allow your hands to rest in your lap.

Begin to breathe naturally without forcing anything. Simply notice the breath for a few cycles.

Now gently begin to extend the exhale. Breathe in for a count of four. Breathe out for a count of six or eight — whatever feels comfortable without strain. The exhale should feel like a gentle, unhurried release rather than a forced push.

Continue for ten to fifteen breath cycles — approximately two to three minutes. If your mind wanders, simply return to counting.

Notice what, if anything, shifts in your body as you practise. You do not need to feel dramatically different. A slight softening, a small sense of settling, is enough.

This practice can be used at any time — before a difficult conversation, before a date, in the middle of the night when sleep will not come, or simply as a daily practice of returning to your body.

Practice two – physiological sigh

Research by neuroscientist Andrew Huberman at Stanford University has identified what he calls the physiological sigh as the fastest known way to reduce physiological stress in real time. It is something the body actually does spontaneously — you may have noticed it as the double inhale that sometimes occurs when you have been crying or are under significant stress. The body is doing this automatically because it works.

Physiological Sigh Practice

Take a full breath in through your nose. At the top of that inhale, before you exhale, take one more short sniff in — filling the lungs as completely as possible.

Then release the breath slowly and fully through your mouth, allowing the exhale to be long and complete.

One to three repetitions of this is sufficient. It can be done discreetly anywhere — on public transport, before walking into a difficult situation, in the moments before a date.

Notice the effect. Most people find it produces an almost immediate sense of physical release.

Practice three — humming and vocalisations

This practice tends to raise an eyebrow the first time I describe it in a clinical setting. I ask people to trust me, try it, and then decide. The vast majority find it surprisingly effective.

The vagus nerve innervates the muscles of the throat and larynx. Vocalisation — particularly humming, chanting, or sustained toning — directly stimulates the vagal pathway and activates the ventral vagal system. This is why singing in community, chanting in spiritual practice, and even the low hum of a mother soothing a child are cross-culturally universal features of human life. They are, among other things, nervous system regulation tools.

Humming Practice

Sit comfortably. Take a breath in, and on the exhale, produce a steady, gentle hum — any pitch that feels comfortable. Allow the hum to last for the full length of the exhale.

Notice the vibration in your chest and throat. Some people also place a hand on their sternum to feel the resonance more directly.

Continue for five to ten breath cycles.

Variations: some people prefer to hum a simple melody rather than a single note. Others find that a low, extended ahhh or ohhhh on the exhale produces a similar effect. Experiment and find what works for your voice and your body.

This practice is best done in private, but its effects carry forward into social situations. Many people find it useful in the minutes before an activating event.

Practice four — cold water and the dive reflex

The mammalian dive reflex is an automatic physiological response triggered by cold water on the face — particularly around the eyes and forehead.

When activated, it produces an immediate slowing of the heart rate and a shift toward parasympathetic dominance. It is rapid, reliable, and requires no particular skill or practice.

Cold Water Practice

When you notice yourself moving significantly above your window — in a state of high anxiety, panic, or emotional flooding — go to a sink and splash cold water on your face, particularly around the eyes and forehead. Alternatively, hold an ice pack or a bag of frozen peas gently against your face for thirty to sixty seconds.

Some people find it helpful to hold their breath slightly while doing this, which further activates the reflex.

This is not a long-term regulation practice — it is an emergency tool for moments of significant hyperarousal. Use it when the gentler practices feel insufficient.

Practice five — gentle movement and shaking

Many animals, after a frightening experience, shake. You can observe this in a dog after a near-miss with a car, or in a deer after escaping a predator. The shaking is not a sign of distress — it is the nervous system completing the stress response cycle, discharging the activation that was mobilised for survival and no longer needed.

Humans have largely lost this capacity — we have learned to suppress the physical discharge of stress because it looks strange and feels vulnerable. But the discharge still needs to happen, and when it does not, the activation remains stored in the body. Gentle, conscious shaking is one way of giving it somewhere to go.

Shaking Practice

Stand with your feet hip-width apart and your knees slightly bent. Begin to gently bounce or shake your legs — just a small movement, nothing dramatic. Allow the shaking to travel up through your hips, your torso, your shoulders and arms.

Continue for two to five minutes, keeping the movement gentle and allowing it to be somewhat involuntary — you are inviting the body to move rather than directing it.

When you stop, stand still for a moment and notice what has changed. Many people feel a warmth or tingling in their limbs, a sense of slight heaviness, or simply a quieter quality to their experience.

This practice can also be done to music, which adds the additional regulatory benefit of rhythm and sound.

Practice six — the safe place visualisation

The nervous system responds to imagined safety in ways that are neurologically similar to how it responds to actual safety. This is the foundation of visualisation

as a regulatory tool — and it is why this practice, which can seem deceptively simple, is used extensively in trauma therapy.

Safe Place Practice

Sit or lie comfortably. Close your eyes, or allow your gaze to be soft and unfocused.

Bring to mind a place — real or imagined — where you feel completely safe. This might be a room, a garden, a beach, a forest, a remembered childhood space, or somewhere entirely invented. The only criterion is that it feels, in your body, like safety.

Allow yourself to inhabit this place as fully as possible. Notice what you can see — the colours, the quality of light, the shapes around you. Notice what you can hear. Notice the temperature of the air, any scents, the feeling of the ground or surface beneath you.

Spend five to ten minutes simply being there, noticing the physical sensations of safety — the ease in your breathing, the slight softening of your muscles, the quality of your attention.

When you are ready to return, bring back with you any word, image or physical sensation that captures the feeling of this place. This becomes an anchor — something you can return to quickly in moments of activation.

Building a daily practice

The nervous system changes through repetition. None of these practices will produce lasting results from a single use. What produces lasting results is the accumulation of small, consistent moments of regulation — the repeated experience of moving outside your window and returning, of activating the vagal pathway and feeling it respond, of sending your body the message, again and again, that safety is possible here.

I would suggest beginning with one or two practices that feel most accessible to you and using them consistently for two to three weeks before adding others. A morning practice of five minutes of extended exhale breathing, combined with the orienting practice from Chapter 5, is a strong foundation. Build from there at your own pace.

And please remember: these practices are a complement to, not a replacement for, professional therapeutic support. If you are working with a therapist, bring these tools into that work. If you are not yet working with a therapist and find that this material is activating significant distress, please consider doing so. The body-based work of recovery is genuinely helped by having a regulated, attuned other person alongside you as you do it.

You spent a long time in a body that did not feel safe. You are not going to reclaim that safety in a week, or a month. But every practice, every breath, every moment of gentle return to your body is a message to your nervous system: the threat has passed. You are here. You are safe. You are learning something new.

In Chapter 7 we turn to emotional regulation — building on the somatic foundation of these practices to develop a broader toolkit for working with the emotional experience of recovery and re-entry into the world of connection.

A note on the practices in this chapter: the extended exhale and physiological sigh practices draw on established research in respiratory physiology and the work of Andrew Huberman at Stanford University. The shaking practice is drawn from Peter Levine's Somatic Experiencing and David Berceli's Trauma Release Exercises (TRE). The safe place visualisation is a standard resource-building technique used extensively in EMDR and trauma-focused therapies. The vagal toning practices draw on Stephen Porges's Polyvagal Theory and its clinical applications. Full references are provided at the end of this book.

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Chapter Seven

Emotional Regulation — The Foundation of Everything

There is a phrase I use often with clients that tends to produce a kind of quiet relief the first time they hear it: regulation is not the absence of emotion. It is the ability to have your emotions without your emotions having you.

This distinction matters enormously — particularly for people who have come through a toxic relationship. Many survivors carry a complicated relationship with their own emotional life. Some have learned to suppress feelings entirely, having discovered that expressing emotion in the relationship was unsafe, unwelcome, or used against them. Others find themselves flooded — overwhelmed by emotional intensity that seems to arrive without warning and subside without logic. Some oscillate between the two: long periods of numbness punctuated by waves of feeling that feel completely unmanageable.

All of these are understandable responses to an environment in which emotions were not safe. And all of them are workable. This chapter explains what

emotional regulation actually is — not as a therapeutic ideal, but as a practical, learnable capacity — and offers a set of tools for developing it.

What emotional regulation actually means

Emotional regulation is frequently misunderstood. It is not the same as emotional control — the ability to suppress, mask, or manage the outward expression of feelings. That kind of control can actually be a sign of dysregulation, not regulation. A person who has learned to appear calm by disconnecting from their emotional experience is not regulated — they are defended.

Genuine emotional regulation is something quite different. It is the capacity to notice an emotion arising, to tolerate its presence in the body without being overwhelmed by it, to allow it to move through and inform rather than hijack, and to respond from a place of considered choice rather than automatic reaction. It is, in essence, the lived experience of being within the window of tolerance while something emotionally significant is happening.

Regulated people are not unfeeling. They feel deeply. The difference is that their feelings are information rather than emergency. They can be moved by grief without being paralysed by it. They can feel

anger without becoming it. They can experience longing, fear, joy, tenderness — and remain, throughout, connected to themselves.

How regulation develops — and how it gets disrupted

Emotional regulation is not something we are born with. It is something we develop — initially through a process that psychologists call co-regulation.

In infancy and early childhood, the nervous system is not yet capable of managing its own states independently. When a baby is distressed, the presence of a calm, attuned caregiver — their steady heartbeat, their warm voice, their gentle handling — directly regulates the baby's nervous system through a process of physiological resonance. The caregiver's regulated state becomes the scaffold within which the baby's own regulatory capacity develops.

Over time, with consistent co-regulation, the child begins to internalise the caregiver's regulating function. They develop the ability to soothe themselves, to tolerate increasing levels of emotional intensity, to return to equilibrium after upset. This internalised capacity is what we call self-regulation — and it is built, brick by brick, through thousands of early experiences of being regulated by another person.

When early caregiving was inconsistent, unavailable, or frightening — as is frequently the case for people who later find themselves in toxic relationships — this developmental process is disrupted. The foundation of self-regulation is less solid. The window of tolerance is narrower from the start. And the person enters adult life with a nervous system that is working harder than it should have to, to manage what a more securely regulated system would handle with relative ease.

A toxic relationship compounds this. It does not simply fail to provide co-regulation — it actively dysregulates. The chronic unpredictability, the emotional intensity, the hypervigilance required to navigate a threatening relational environment, all erode whatever regulatory capacity the person has developed. By the time many people leave a toxic relationship, their ability to self-regulate is significantly compromised — not because they are weak, but because they have been systematically depleted.

The three levels of regulation

It is useful to think about emotional regulation as operating at three distinct but interconnected levels — the body, the emotion itself, and the mind. Lasting regulation requires attention to all three. Approaches that work only at the level of thought — trying to think your way to calmness — are working at the top of the

system. They can be useful, but they are not sufficient on their own, and they are often the last level to come online when the system is significantly activated.

The body – bottom-up regulation

As we explored in Chapter 6, the most direct and often fastest route to emotional regulation is through the body. Breath, movement, temperature, vocalisation, and physical grounding all work at the level of the autonomic nervous system — below the threshold of conscious thought — to shift the physiological state from which all emotional experience arises.

Bottom-up regulation is particularly important for people who have experienced significant trauma, because trauma is stored somatically — in the body — and cognitive approaches alone cannot fully reach it. This is why the practices in Chapter 6 are foundational rather than supplementary. They are not add-ons to the real work. They are the real work.

The emotion – working with feeling directly

The second level of regulation involves working with the emotion itself — not to suppress it, but to create enough space around it to be able to be with it rather than consumed by it. Several approaches are useful here.

The first is naming. Research by neuroscientist Matthew Lieberman has consistently shown that labelling an emotion — putting it into words — reduces activation in the amygdala, the brain's threat-detection centre, and increases activity in the prefrontal cortex, which is involved in perspective and measured response. Simply saying to yourself, or writing down, I am feeling angry, or This is grief, or What I notice is fear — produces a measurable shift in the emotional experience. Not a suppression, but a slight increase in the distance between you and the feeling — enough to allow you to observe it rather than only be it.

The second approach is allowing. Many people, particularly those who learned early that their feelings were unwelcome, have developed a habit of fighting their emotional experience — trying to push feelings away, override them, or shame themselves out of them. This fighting paradoxically intensifies the emotion. What allows an emotion to move through is the opposite: turning toward it with curiosity rather than resistance, allowing it to be present without trying to change it, and trusting that it will not last forever. Emotions, when not fought, tend to peak and then subside within minutes. It is the fighting that keeps them circling.

The mind — top-down regulation

The third level of regulation involves the thinking mind — the capacity for perspective, reframing, and cognitive restructuring that forms the basis of CBT. This level is powerful and important, but it is most accessible once some degree of physiological settling has occurred. Trying to challenge a cognitive distortion from within a state of significant sympathetic activation is like trying to read a book in a hurricane — the words are there, but the conditions do not allow them to land.

Top-down regulation tools include: stepping back from a thought to ask whether it is fact or interpretation; identifying the cognitive distortions — catastrophising, mind-reading, all-or-nothing thinking — that amplify emotional experience; and developing the capacity to hold multiple perspectives on a situation rather than being locked into a single, often worst-case, reading.

We will work extensively with top-down tools in Part Three, when we turn to the core beliefs and life positions that the toxic relationship shaped. For now, the most important top-down tool is simply the practice of pausing — of creating even a small gap between stimulus and response — within which choice becomes possible.

Co-regulation and why relationships still matter

I want to return to the concept of co-regulation here, because it has a particular relevance to the journey of dating again that is not always acknowledged.

Human beings never entirely outgrow the need for co-regulation. The capacity for self-regulation develops through co-regulation and continues to be supported by it throughout life. We are a deeply social species, and our nervous systems are designed to be influenced by the nervous systems of the people around us. This is not weakness. It is biology.

What this means practically is that the quality of the relationships in your life right now — not romantic relationships necessarily, but any relationship characterised by genuine safety, warmth, and attunement — is itself a regulatory resource. Time spent with people who are themselves regulated, who listen without agenda, who can tolerate your emotional experience without becoming overwhelmed by it or trying to fix it, directly supports the development and restoration of your own regulatory capacity.

Conversely, this is why it matters to be thoughtful about the relational environment you inhabit during recovery. Not every relationship is co-regulating. Some relationships are actively dysregulating — they increase activation, introduce unpredictability, or

require the kind of emotional labour that depletes rather than replenishes. Attending to this is not selfishness. It is self-stewardship.

Regulation and the risk of using dating as a regulation strategy

There is something I want to name directly here, because it is a pattern I have observed many times and it causes significant pain when it is not understood.

The longing for connection that many people feel after a toxic relationship is not only romantic. It is, at least in part, a longing for co-regulation — for the felt sense of another person's presence settling the nervous system that has been in isolation and distress. This longing is entirely understandable. And it can lead people back into dating before they are truly ready — not because they want a relationship in a full sense, but because they are seeking relief from an unbearable state of dysregulation.

Dating entered from this place tends to produce relationships that replicate the intensity of the toxic dynamic — because intensity, in a dysregulated nervous system, can feel like connection. The neurochemical relief of early attachment activation can be mistaken for love. And the person finds themselves, once again, in a relationship that feels urgent and consuming rather than grounded and genuine.

This is not a judgment. It is a pattern worth understanding. The work of this section of the book — developing somatic resources, widening the window of tolerance, building genuine self-regulation — is the work of becoming someone who chooses a relationship rather than someone who reaches for one because they cannot bear to be alone with themselves.

Regulation is not the absence of emotion. It is the ability to have your emotions without your emotions having you. And it is the single most important capacity you can develop before you step back into the world of love and connection.

Part Two is now complete. In Part Three we turn from the body to the mind — to the beliefs, life positions, and self-narratives that the toxic relationship shaped, and to the work of revising them from the inside out.

Reflection and Practice – Chapter Seven

Take a moment to settle before you begin. Use the extended exhale breathing from Chapter 6 if that feels helpful.

Part One – Your regulation history

In your journal, reflect on the following questions:

- How was emotional expression received in your early family environment? Were feelings welcomed, dismissed, punished, or ignored? What did you learn, from that environment, about what to do with difficult emotions?
- How has your relationship with your own emotions changed as a result of the toxic relationship? What feelings did you learn to suppress? What feelings became overwhelming?
- Who in your current life co-regulates you — whose presence genuinely settles your nervous system? How often do you spend time with those people?
- Can you identify any ways in which you have used or might be tempted to use dating as a regulation strategy — seeking connection primarily to relieve the

discomfort of being alone or dysregulated?

Part Two — The STOP practice

This is a brief, practical regulation tool drawn from Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy that can be used in any moment of emotional activation.

S — Stop. Whatever you are doing, pause for a moment.

T — Take a breath. One slow, deliberate breath. Exhale fully.

O — Observe. Notice what is happening in your body right now. Where do you feel the emotion? What is its quality — tight, heavy, hot, sharp? Simply observe without trying to change anything.

P — Proceed. From this slightly more grounded place, choose how to respond — rather than simply reacting.

Practice using this tool over the coming days whenever you notice emotional activation beginning. You do not need to be in crisis for it to be useful. The more you use it in lower-intensity moments, the more available it will be when you really need it.

A note on the material in this chapter: the concept of co-regulation and its role in the development of self-regulation draws on the work of Stephen Porges and on Allan Schore's extensive research on affect regulation and the developing right brain. The affect labelling research is drawn from Matthew Lieberman's work at UCLA. The STOP practice is a standard tool from Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, drawing on the foundational work of Zindel Segal, Mark Williams and John Teasdale. Full references are provided at the end of this book.

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Part Three — Student

Understanding Your Mind

Part Three covers Chapters 8, 9, 10 and 11. Having laid the somatic foundation in Part Two, we now turn to the mind — to the beliefs, life positions, identity and self-narratives that the toxic relationship shaped. This is not a departure from the body work. It is a continuation of it. A regulated nervous system is what makes the cognitive work of this section possible.

Chapter Eight

How Toxicity Rewired Your Self-Worth

At some point during or after the toxic relationship, you may have noticed that the voice inside your head began to sound remarkably like the person who hurt you. The criticism, the dismissal, the quiet but persistent suggestion that you are too much, not enough, fundamentally flawed in some way that makes you difficult to love — at some point that voice stopped being something that came from outside and became something that felt like your own.

This is one of the most insidious effects of sustained relational toxicity. It does not only hurt you in the present. It installs a mechanism — a set of deeply held beliefs about yourself — that continues to hurt you long after the relationship has ended. Understanding how this happens, and how to work with it, is the subject of this chapter.

Core beliefs — what they are and where they come from

In Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, the term core belief refers to the deepest layer of a person's belief system — the fundamental convictions they hold about themselves, other people, and the world. Unlike surface-level thoughts, which are relatively fleeting and accessible to conscious awareness, core beliefs operate largely below the threshold of conscious attention. They are not things we think so much as things we assume — the unexamined premises from which our thinking proceeds.

Core beliefs are formed early. They develop in childhood and adolescence through the accumulation of experience — particularly relational experience — and once formed, they tend to be remarkably stable and resistant to revision. This stability is partly functional: beliefs that feel fundamental to our understanding of ourselves are not easily dislodged, because to dislodge them would require a significant reorganisation of how we make sense of our lives.

The problem arises when core beliefs are negative — when the accumulated experience of early life produces convictions like I am unlovable, I am not good enough, I am a burden, I am fundamentally flawed, Other people cannot be trusted, The world is unsafe. These beliefs are not pathological. They are reasonable

conclusions drawn from unreasonable circumstances. But they shape everything — the relationships we enter, the treatment we accept, the opportunities we allow ourselves to pursue, the love we permit ourselves to receive.

How a toxic relationship activates and deepens negative core beliefs

Most people who find themselves in toxic relationships arrive with pre-existing negative core beliefs — often formed in childhood through experiences of criticism, neglect, inconsistency, or abuse. This is not the cause of the toxic relationship. It is not their fault. But it is part of the story.

Negative core beliefs create a particular kind of vulnerability. A person who believes, at their deepest level, that they are not quite good enough will be more susceptible to the attention of someone who initially appears to offer proof of the opposite — someone who sees them fully, values them intensely, makes them feel chosen and special in a way that temporarily quiets the core belief. This is part of the intoxicating quality of the early stages of many toxic relationships. The other person, consciously or not, seems to offer relief from the most painful conviction the person holds about themselves.

When the relationship turns — when the criticism begins, the contempt, the gaslighting, the intermittent withdrawal of warmth — the negative core belief does not simply reassert itself. It deepens. Every critical comment lands on a foundation of existing self-doubt and becomes, in the mind of the person receiving it, not an attack but a confirmation. Not something being done to them but something being revealed about them. The relationship does not create the core belief. But it excavates it, amplifies it, and gives it a texture of lived experience that makes it feel even more indisputably true.

By the time the relationship ends, many survivors find themselves holding negative core beliefs that feel not merely plausible but utterly self-evident. Of course I am difficult to love. Of course I cause problems. Of course my needs are too much. The relationship has provided what feels like extensive evidence.

The most common negative core beliefs after a toxic relationship

In my clinical experience, the following core beliefs appear most frequently in people recovering from toxic relationships. As you read through them, notice which ones produce a sense of recognition — a felt sense of yes, that is what I believe about myself, even when I know intellectually that it may not be true.

I am unlovable

The belief that there is something fundamentally about you that makes sustained, genuine love impossible — that people may be interested initially but will eventually see the truth and withdraw. This belief often produces a painful double bind in dating: a desperate longing for love alongside a deep conviction that it cannot last, which leads to either avoidance of intimacy or a tendency to unconsciously test relationships in ways that confirm the belief.

I am too much

The belief that your emotional depth, your needs, your intensity, your sensitivity are excessive — that you overwhelm people, ask too much, feel too deeply, care too strongly. This belief is particularly common in people who were told, explicitly or implicitly, that their emotional experience was disproportionate. It often leads to the suppression of genuine feeling and the performance of a more contained, less demanding version of the self.

I am not enough

The belief that you are inadequate — not attractive enough, interesting enough, intelligent enough, successful enough — to be genuinely valued. This belief often coexists with significant external

achievement, because achievement is one of the most common strategies for managing the painful gap between how one feels on the inside and how one is required to appear.

I am the problem

The belief that conflict, difficulty and pain in relationships originate with you — that if things go wrong, you are the cause. This belief is almost universally present in people who have experienced gaslighting, because gaslighting is specifically designed to locate the source of relational difficulty in the person being gaslighted. By the time the relationship ends, the person has been so thoroughly convinced of their own culpability that they may find it genuinely difficult to assign any responsibility to the person who hurt them.

I cannot trust my own judgement

The belief that your perceptions, assessments and decisions cannot be relied upon — that you were wrong about the person you loved, and therefore you may be wrong about anyone. This belief produces significant anxiety in the context of new relationships and can lead to a paralysing inability to make decisions about who to trust and how much.

The CBT framework — thoughts, feelings, behaviour

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy offers one of the most practically useful frameworks for understanding and working with core beliefs. At its heart, CBT proposes that our emotional experience and behaviour are not simply reactions to external events — they are mediated by the way we think about those events. The same situation can produce entirely different emotional responses in different people depending on the beliefs through which it is filtered.

Aaron Beck, who developed CBT in the 1960s and 1970s, identified a hierarchical structure to cognition. At the surface are automatic thoughts — the rapid, often barely conscious stream of interpretation that runs through our minds in response to events. These automatic thoughts are shaped by intermediate beliefs — rules and assumptions about how the world works. And beneath those intermediate beliefs lie core beliefs — the fundamental convictions about self and world from which the whole structure proceeds.

The practical implication of this model is that working only at the level of automatic thoughts — challenging surface-level thinking without addressing the core beliefs from which it springs — produces limited and temporary change. Lasting change requires going deeper: identifying the core belief,

understanding where it came from, examining the evidence for and against it, and gradually building a more accurate and compassionate alternative.

This is the work of Chapters 8 and 11 — and it is work that benefits enormously from being done alongside a therapist, though the exercises in this chapter will give you a meaningful starting point.

The difference between a belief and a truth

One of the most important conceptual shifts in CBT work is the recognition that a thought — however vivid, however persistent, however deeply felt — is not automatically a fact. Thoughts are mental events. They are interpretations, not transcripts of reality. And interpretations, however convincing they feel, can be mistaken.

This is a difficult idea to hold when the belief in question concerns something as fundamental as your own worth and lovability. The feeling of being unlovable can be so visceral, so thoroughly woven into your sense of self, that to question it can feel almost absurd — like questioning whether the sky is blue. But the sky's colour is a fact. Your unlovability is a belief — one formed under particular conditions, shaped by particular experiences, and therefore available, at least in principle, to revision.

The critical voice that tells you that you are too much, not enough, or fundamentally difficult to love — that voice is not the truth about you. It is the residue of someone else's inability to love well. And it can be changed — not quickly, not easily, but genuinely and lastingly.

Chapter 11 will offer specific CBT tools for beginning that process of change. Before we get there, we have two more chapters in Part Three — on life positions and identity — that will help you understand the broader landscape within which core beliefs operate. In Chapter 9, we turn to one of the most illuminating frameworks in all of Transactional Analysis: the four life positions, and the script that a toxic relationship can lock you into.

Reflection — Chapter Eight

Take your time settling before you begin. This chapter asks you to look at some of the most tender material in your inner life. Be as gentle with yourself as you would be with someone you love.

In your journal, work through the following:

- Which of the core beliefs described in this chapter felt most familiar? Write it out in your own words — the version that feels most specifically true of how you see yourself.
- When did you first start to hold this belief? Can you trace it back beyond the toxic relationship — to earlier experiences, earlier relationships, earlier voices?
- How did the toxic relationship interact with this belief? Did it activate it, confirm it, deepen it? In what specific ways?
- Now ask yourself: if a close friend described themselves in the way this belief describes you — too much, not enough, unlovable, the problem — what would you say to them? Write that

response. Notice the difference between how you speak to yourself and how you speak to someone you care about.

- Finally: is it possible — even slightly, even theoretically — that the belief is a conclusion drawn from limited and distorted evidence, rather than an accurate description of who you are?

You do not need to feel convinced of the answer to that last question. You simply need to hold it open — to allow the possibility that the verdict is not final.

A note on CBT and core beliefs: the foundational texts here are Aaron Beck's Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders (1976) and Cognitive Therapy of Depression (1979). For an accessible and compassionate approach to working with core beliefs, Melanie Fennell's Overcoming Low Self-Esteem (1999) is warmly recommended. Full references are provided at the end of this book.

The beliefs formed under stress are not the truth about you. The Talk & Love™ *Back to Dating Hub* is built for the person you are becoming — not the one who was hurt.

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Chapter Nine

Life Positions and the Script You Inherited

In Chapter 8 we looked at core beliefs — the deeply held convictions about yourself that a toxic relationship activates and deepens. In this chapter we go one layer wider, to look at something that Transactional Analysis calls the life position — the fundamental stance a person takes toward themselves and the world — and at the concept of the life script: the largely unconscious story a person is living out, often written in childhood and running in the background of every significant relationship they have ever had.

These are not comfortable ideas to sit with. The suggestion that we might be living according to a script — that our choices, our patterns, our relationships might be shaped by a story we did not consciously choose — can feel either illuminating or threatening, depending on where you are in your recovery. I would ask you to hold it with curiosity rather than defensiveness. Understanding the script is not the same as being trapped by it. In fact it is the opposite: you cannot rewrite a story you cannot see.

The four life positions

Eric Berne, the founder of Transactional Analysis, proposed that every person develops a fundamental position — a basic stance toward themselves and others — very early in life, and that this position shapes their experience of every relationship that follows. He identified four possible positions, expressed in deceptively simple language that belies their profound psychological depth.

I'm OK — You're OK

This is the position of psychological health — the stance of a person who holds a fundamentally positive view of both themselves and others. From this position, relationships are approached with openness and genuine mutuality. Disagreement does not feel catastrophic. Imperfection — in oneself and in others — is tolerable. Life feels navigable.

It is worth noting that this position does not mean naivety or the denial of real difficulty. A person in the I'm OK — You're OK position can acknowledge that they have made mistakes, that others have hurt them, that the world contains genuine hardship — without those acknowledgements destabilising their fundamental sense of their own worth or the trustworthiness of human connection.

I'm OK — You're Not OK

This is the position associated with a defended superiority — a stance in which the self is experienced as fundamentally acceptable but others are viewed with suspicion, contempt, or dismissal. From this position, relationships tend toward dominance and control. Vulnerability in others is experienced as weakness. Closeness feels dangerous because it requires treating others as equals.

In a toxic relationship, this is frequently the position occupied by the person doing the harm — the one whose criticism, contempt and control communicate, beneath all the surface content, a fundamental belief that they are acceptable and others are not. This position is almost always a defence against a deeper, more intolerable sense of inadequacy. The contempt directed outward is, at its root, contempt that cannot be tolerated when directed inward.

I'm Not OK — You're OK

This is perhaps the most common position among people recovering from toxic relationships — and often the position that was present long before the relationship began. From this stance, the self is experienced as fundamentally deficient — not quite

good enough, less than, inferior in some essential way — while others are viewed as more capable, more worthy, more at ease in the world.

From this position, relationships are frequently entered from a place of deficit — seeking in another person the validation, worth, or completeness that feels unavailable from within. The person in this position tends to accept poor treatment more readily than someone in the I'm OK — You're OK position, because poor treatment feels, at some level, like confirmation of what they already believe about themselves. And genuinely loving, respectful treatment can feel uncomfortable — undeserved, suspect, or simply unfamiliar.

If this position resonates with you, I want to say clearly: it is not a permanent condition. It is a learned stance, developed in response to early experiences that communicated — explicitly or through neglect and inconsistency — that you were somehow less than. And because it was learned, it can be revised.

I'm Not OK — You're Not OK

This is the position of deepest despair — a stance in which neither the self nor others are experienced as fundamentally trustworthy or worthwhile. From here, relationships feel futile, hope feels irrational, and withdrawal or resignation can feel like the only honest response to a world that has consistently disappointed.

This position tends to develop in response to the most severe early experiences — profound neglect, abuse, or abandonment — and is associated with significant depression and a loss of meaning. If this position resonates strongly, please consider seeking therapeutic support alongside reading this book. You deserve more than these pages can offer on their own.

Life scripts — the story running beneath the surface

Building on the concept of life positions, Berne developed the idea of the life script — the largely unconscious life plan that a person develops in early childhood in response to the messages they receive from their environment. He described it as a drama with a predetermined ending — a story that the person is living out, often without awareness, in which the roles, the patterns and the final act have already been, in some sense, decided.

Script messages — the communications from early caregivers that contribute to the formation of the script — are rarely explicit. They are conveyed through tone, through behaviour, through what is consistently responded to and what is consistently ignored. A child who is praised only when they are achieving and never simply for being receives a script message: your worth is conditional on performance. A child who learns that

expressing needs leads to withdrawal or punishment receives a script message: needing things from others is dangerous. A child who grows up in an environment of chronic conflict and unpredictability receives a script message about what relationships are — and that message will shape every relationship they enter as an adult.

Script messages are not delivered with malice. Most parents and caregivers are themselves living out their own scripts, passing on patterns they received without awareness or intention. Understanding this is not about absolving people of responsibility for harm they caused. It is about understanding the depth and the origins of the patterns you are working with — and the intergenerational nature of relational wounding.

How the toxic relationship fits the script

One of the most confronting insights that TA offers is this: toxic relationships rarely feel entirely unfamiliar. At some level — beneath the conscious experience of shock, hurt and confusion — the dynamic has a quality of recognition. The criticism that confirms the I'm not OK position. The unpredictability that matches the early environment in which love was inconsistent. The role of rescuer or caretaker that was first learned in childhood. The intensity that feels, despite everything, like home.

This is not a criticism of the person who stayed. It is an explanation. The nervous system gravitates toward what it knows — not because what it knows is good, but because familiar territory, however painful, feels navigable in a way that the genuinely unknown does not. The toxic relationship fitted the script. And the script, until it is examined and rewritten, tends to keep attracting the same kind of story.

I have sat with people who have left three, four, five relationships that looked completely different on the surface and were structurally almost identical beneath it — the same dynamic, the same emotional experience, the same eventual ending. Each time they believed they had chosen differently. Each time the script ran. Not because they were foolish or self-destructive, but because the script was operating below the level of conscious choice.

Seeing the script is what makes genuine choice possible.

Ego states and how they show up in relationships

Alongside life positions and scripts, Berne identified what he called ego states — three distinct modes of experiencing and relating that every person moves between. He called them Parent, Adult, and Child.

The Parent ego state contains the internalised attitudes, values and behaviours of early authority figures — the critical voice that tells you that you are not good enough, or the nurturing voice that offers comfort. The Critical Parent is the ego state most commonly activated in a toxic relationship — both in the person doing the harm, whose Critical Parent dominates their interactions, and in the person receiving it, whose own internal Critical Parent amplifies and confirms the external criticism.

The Child ego state contains the emotional responses, needs and adaptive strategies of early experience — the Free Child who feels and plays and responds spontaneously, and the Adapted Child who learned to modify natural responses in order to survive the relational environment. The Adapted Child is the ego state most associated with the patterns explored in this book — the people-pleasing, the self-suppression, the hyper-attunement to others' moods, the difficulty knowing what one actually wants or feels.

The Adult ego state is the part of us capable of clear thinking, accurate perception, and considered response — the ego state from which genuine choice is made. One of the goals of the work in this book is to strengthen the Adult — to create enough internal space for the Adult to observe what the Parent and Child are doing, and to make decisions from a place of clarity rather than from the automatic pull of the script.

Rewriting the script — the possibility of a new ending

Berne was clear that life scripts, once identified, can be rewritten. This is not a trivial undertaking — a script that has been running for decades, shaped by early experiences of significant emotional weight, does not dissolve simply because it has been named. But naming it is the essential first step. You cannot change what you cannot see.

The rewriting of a script happens gradually, through accumulated new experience — through relationships that do not confirm the old story, through therapeutic work that offers a different relational experience, through the development of the Adult ego state's capacity to observe and intervene in automatic patterns, and through the conscious, deliberate choice to act differently even when the script is pulling hard in another direction.

You are rewriting a script that was never truly yours. It was written for you, by people who were themselves living out scripts they had not chosen. The story that told you that you were not OK — that love was conditional, that your needs were too much, that you would always end up here — that story was never the truth. It was the best available account, given limited evidence and no alternative. You

have better evidence now. And you are capable of a different account.

In Chapter 10 we turn from the script to the self — to the work of reclaiming the identity that the toxic relationship suppressed, and reconnecting with the person you were before the story began to run in the wrong direction.

Reflection — Chapter Nine

Settle yourself before you begin. This chapter has covered significant ground and it is worth taking a breath before moving into reflection.

In your journal, work through the following:

- Which life position felt most familiar as you read this chapter? Can you recognise it in your relationship history — not just in the toxic relationship, but in the pattern of relationships across your life?
- What script messages do you think you received in early life? Not through explicit statements necessarily, but through the consistent patterns of how you were treated, what was responded to and what was ignored. What did those messages teach you about your own worth?
- Can you see how the toxic relationship fitted your script — how it confirmed a story that was already running? This is not about self-blame. It is about clarity.
- Which ego state do you spend the most time in — Critical Parent, Adapted Child, or Adult? In what situations does each tend to dominate?

- If you were to write a single sentence describing the script you have been living — the underlying story about yourself and relationships that has been running — what would it say? And what single sentence might describe the script you would choose to live instead?

That last question is not rhetorical. The new script begins with being able to articulate it — however tentatively, however provisionally. Write it down.

A note on Transactional Analysis: the foundational texts are Eric Berne's Games People Play (1964) and What Do You Say After You Say Hello? (1972). For a highly accessible and clinically rich introduction to TA, Ian Stewart and Vann Joines' TA Today (1987, updated 2012) is the standard recommended text. Full references are provided at the end of this book.

You are rewriting a script that was never truly yours. The Talk & Love™ *Back to Dating Hub* supports the next chapter — the one you choose.

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Chapter Ten

Reclaiming Your Identity

One of the quieter, less often discussed losses of a toxic relationship is the loss of self. Not the dramatic, sudden loss of a bereavement — but a slow, cumulative erosion. A gradual shrinking of the space you took up. A progressive narrowing of what you were allowed to like, to want, to think, to be. Until one day you looked up and realised that the person looking back from the mirror was someone you barely recognised — someone who had learned to be whatever the relationship required, at the cost of almost everything that had originally been distinctively, irreducibly themselves.

This chapter is about finding that person again.

Not the person you were before the relationship — time does not run backwards, and you would not want it to. But the essential self that was there before the erosion began. The values, the preferences, the instincts, the particular quality of aliveness that belongs specifically to you and to no one else. That self did not disappear. It went quiet. It learned to stay small. And it is waiting — with more patience than you

perhaps deserve, and more loyalty than you have probably allowed yourself to feel — to be welcomed back.

What identity erosion looks like

Identity erosion in a toxic relationship rarely announces itself. It happens in increments — each one small enough to seem unremarkable, cumulative enough to produce, over time, a profound disconnection from the self.

It might begin with small adjustments — softening an opinion to avoid conflict, declining an invitation because your partner finds those friends irritating, choosing a different style of clothing because a certain look was met with contempt. These adjustments feel, at the time, like reasonable accommodation. Every relationship requires compromise, after all. The difference in a toxic relationship is that the accommodation flows in one direction — always toward what the other person requires, never toward what you genuinely want or need.

Over time the adjustments accumulate. Interests that were mocked get quietly abandoned. Friends who were criticised drift away. Ambitions that were minimised begin to feel grandiose or foolish. The language you use to describe your own experience begins to carry the other person's framing — their assessment of your worth, their account of what

happened, their verdict on who you are. And the self that existed before the relationship — the one with opinions, preferences, appetites, enthusiasms, and a clear sense of what mattered — becomes increasingly difficult to locate.

By the time the relationship ends, many people find themselves in the disorienting position of not knowing, in quite fundamental ways, who they are. What do I actually like? What do I genuinely think? What do I want — not in relation to someone else, but for myself, from my own life? These questions, which might seem to have obvious answers, can feel genuinely unanswerable. The self that would have answered them has been so thoroughly subordinated that its voice has become very quiet indeed.

The Free Child — your original self

In Transactional Analysis, Eric Berne described what he called the Free Child ego state — the part of the self that exists prior to adaptation, prior to the learned modifications required by the relational environment. The Free Child is the seat of genuine spontaneity, authentic feeling, natural curiosity, pleasure, and creative response to the world. It is not childish in the pejorative sense — it is the part of you that knows what it actually feels, wants what it actually wants, and responds to life with unmediated aliveness rather than performed acceptability.

Alongside the Free Child, Berne described the Adapted Child — the part of the self that learned, through experience, to modify natural responses in order to secure love, approval, or safety. The Adapted Child is not pathological — adaptation is necessary and healthy to a degree. But in a toxic relationship, the Adapted Child is forced into dominance. The Free Child — the authentic, spontaneous, genuinely feeling self — learns that it is not safe, not welcome, not acceptable. And it retreats.

The work of reclaiming identity is, in significant part, the work of creating the conditions in which the Free Child can re-emerge — slowly, tentatively at first, and then with increasing confidence as it discovers that the environment has changed and that being genuinely yourself is no longer dangerous.

Values — the compass beneath the noise

One of the most reliable routes back to yourself is through your values. Not the values you were told to have, or the values that made the relationship easier to navigate, but the values that feel — when you sit with them honestly — like the most authentic expression of what you care about and who you want to be.

Values are different from goals. Goals are things you want to achieve. Values are the qualities of living that matter to you regardless of outcome — honesty, creativity, connection, courage, kindness, freedom,

depth, service, beauty, integrity. They are the things that, when you are living in alignment with them, produce a sense of rightness — a quiet but unmistakable feeling of being genuinely yourself.

In a toxic relationship, values are frequently compromised. A person who values honesty learns to manage information carefully to avoid conflict. A person who values freedom learns to seek permission. A person who values creativity learns to keep that part of themselves private because it was met with indifference or contempt. The consistent violation of one's own values — even when that violation is driven by necessity rather than choice — produces a corrosive effect on self-respect and identity.

Reconnecting with your values is not an abstract exercise. It is a practical act of self-reclamation. When you know what you actually value — when you can feel it, not just think it — you have a compass. And a compass is one of the most important things you can carry into the process of choosing a new relationship.

Preferences, pleasures and the recovery of appetite

Below the level of values — and in some ways more immediately accessible — are the smaller, more sensory dimensions of identity: preferences, pleasures, and what I would call appetite for life. The music that

moves you. The food that genuinely delights you. The quality of conversation that makes you feel most alive. The physical environments in which you feel most like yourself. The activities that produce a state of absorbed engagement rather than performed enjoyment.

Many survivors of toxic relationships find, in the early period after leaving, that these things have become strangely muted. The music that once moved you produces nothing. The food tastes flat. The things that used to bring pleasure feel distant or inaccessible. This is partly a function of the nervous system states we explored in Part Two — the dorsal vagal shutdown that flattens emotional response and dulls the appetite for experience. And it is partly the deeper disorientation of not quite knowing who you are any more.

The recovery of appetite — the gradual return of genuine pleasure, curiosity and delight — is one of the most reliable signs that healing is progressing. It cannot be forced, but it can be invited. And the invitation comes through gentle, low-pressure re-engagement with the things that used to matter — not because you feel like it, but as a deliberate act of reacquaintance with the self that went quiet.

The question of who you are becoming

I want to introduce a reframe here that I find genuinely useful in clinical work — and that is particularly relevant to the question of identity after a toxic relationship.

The question most people ask themselves is: who was I before this happened? The implicit aim is to return — to recover a prior self, to undo the damage, to get back to where they were. This is understandable, but it sets up a goal that is both impossible and, in an important sense, undesirable. The person you were before the relationship is not someone you can return to. Too much has happened. Too much has been learned — about yourself, about relationships, about what you are capable of surviving.

The more useful question is not who was I, but who am I becoming. Because the person emerging from this experience — if the work of healing is done honestly and with courage — is not a diminished version of the person who went in. They are, in some genuinely important ways, more themselves. More self-aware. More discerning. More acquainted with their own depths. More capable, eventually, of the kind of intimacy that requires genuine self-knowledge.

The toxic relationship took things from you. That is true and it deserves to be acknowledged. But it also, in ways that are painful to admit, gave you things — a knowledge of your own resilience, a clarity about what

you will not accept, a depth of self-understanding that many people who have lived only in comfortable relationships do not possess.

You are not returning to yourself. You are arriving at a version of yourself that could not have existed before this. That is not consolation. It is simply the truth of what is possible from where you are standing.

Coming home to yourself is the most important thing you will ever do. Not the self you were before — the self you are becoming. The one who knows more, needs less approval, and is slowly, genuinely learning that being entirely yourself is not dangerous. It is the only thing worth being.

Identity and the next relationship

Before we close this chapter, I want to connect the work of identity reclamation directly to the question of dating again — because the connection is more direct than it might initially appear.

The person who steps into a new relationship without a clear sense of their own identity — without knowing what they value, what they genuinely enjoy, what they will and will not accept — is in a vulnerable position. Not because they are weak, but because identity is the foundation of boundaries, and boundaries are the foundation of healthy relationship.

Without a clear sense of self, the accommodations and adjustments that erode identity in a toxic relationship can begin again almost immediately — not necessarily through any malign intent on the other person's part, but simply through the path of least resistance.

The person who arrives in a new relationship knowing themselves — knowing what they value, what brings them alive, what they need, what they will not compromise on — is able to be present as themselves rather than as an adapting, performing version of themselves. And that presence is both more attractive and more protective than any other quality they could bring.

We will return to this in Part Four, when we explore the ways in which your deepest vulnerabilities and most essential qualities become, once understood, your most precise compass for choosing well.

Reflection and Practice — Chapter Ten

This chapter's exercise has three parts. Take your time with each. There is no rush.

Part One — Values clarification

From the list below, circle or note the ten values that feel most genuinely important to you — not the ones you think you should have, but the ones that produce a felt sense of recognition when you read them.

Honesty — Creativity — Connection — Freedom —
Courage — Kindness — Integrity — Depth —
Service — Beauty — Adventure — Security —
Loyalty — Growth — Authenticity — Playfulness —
Wisdom — Justice — Solitude — Presence —
Spirituality — Independence — Generosity —
Curiosity

From your ten, choose the three that feel most essential — the ones without which you would not recognise yourself. Write them down. Sit with them. Notice what they tell you about who you are and what a relationship would need to honour in order to genuinely fit your life.

Part Two — Appetite inventory

In your journal, make a list of the things that used to bring you genuine pleasure, curiosity or aliveness — before or early in the relationship, before the erosion began. Music, food, places, activities, kinds of conversation, physical experiences, creative pursuits, anything at all.

Then note: which of these have you lost contact with? Which are still available to you? Which could you re-engage with this week — not because you are certain you will enjoy it, but as an act of reacquaintance with the self that went quiet?

Choose one. Do it. Notice what happens.

Part Three — The becoming question

In your journal, complete the following sentence as honestly and specifically as you can:

The person I am becoming — having lived through this and chosen to understand it — is someone who...

Write as much or as little as comes. Return to it over the coming days and add to it as things occur to you. This is not a performance of positivity. It is an honest account of what is genuinely emerging.

A note on the material in this chapter: the Free Child and Adapted Child concepts are drawn from Eric Berne's foundational TA framework, developed in Games People Play (1964) and What Do You Say After You Say Hello?

(1972). *The values clarification exercise draws on approaches used in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), developed by Steven Hayes and described accessibly in Russ Harris's The Happiness Trap (2008). Full references are provided at the end of this book.*

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Chapter Eleven

Challenging the Belief: I Am Not Loveable

In Chapter 8 we mapped the core beliefs that a toxic relationship activates and deepens — the convictions about yourself that feel so thoroughly confirmed by experience that questioning them can seem almost absurd. In Chapter 9 we placed those beliefs within the broader framework of the life script — the story running beneath your conscious awareness that has been shaping your relational choices for longer than you perhaps realised. In Chapter 10 we began the work of reconnecting with the self that the script has been obscuring.

This chapter is where we take those beliefs directly in hand.

Not to argue with them aggressively, not to paste positive affirmations over them, and not to pretend they are not there. But to examine them — carefully, honestly, and with the specific tools that Cognitive Behavioural Therapy offers for doing exactly this — and to begin the slow, genuine work of building something more accurate in their place.

Why positive thinking is not enough

Before we begin, I want to address something that many people try before they arrive at the kind of work this chapter offers — and that consistently fails to produce lasting change. It is the strategy of simply telling yourself the opposite of what you believe.

I am unlovable becomes I am worthy of love. I am too much becomes I am perfectly enough. These statements are recited in mirrors, written on sticky notes, repeated as affirmations. And for most people, they produce nothing beyond a faint sense of fraudulence — because the nervous system and the deeper belief system know, with an uncomfortable precision, when they are being lied to.

The problem with affirmations as a strategy for changing core beliefs is that they attempt to replace a belief without examining it — without looking honestly at the evidence that has been used to construct it, without asking where it came from, without acknowledging the ways in which it has been a reasonable if mistaken conclusion from genuinely difficult experience. A belief that has been built from the material of lived experience cannot simply be overwritten with a contradictory statement. It has to be engaged — questioned, tested, and gradually revised through the accumulation of new evidence and new experience.

That is what this chapter offers.

The thought record — examining the evidence

The thought record is one of the foundational tools of CBT — a structured method for examining the relationship between a situation, the thoughts it produces, the emotions those thoughts generate, and the behaviour that follows. Used at the level of core beliefs, it becomes a tool for examining the evidence base on which a belief rests — and for building a more balanced, more accurate alternative.

The process has several steps. It is worth working through it slowly, on paper, the first several times you use it. With practice it becomes more fluid and can be done mentally in real time — but that fluency takes time, and the paper version is significantly more powerful in the early stages because the act of writing creates a small but important distance between you and the thought.

The Core Belief Thought Record

Step 1 — Identify the belief

Write down the core belief you are working with, as specifically and honestly as you can. Not a softened version, but the actual belief as it feels from the inside.

Example: *I am fundamentally unlovable. People may be interested in me initially but eventually they will see who I really am and withdraw.*

Step 2 — Rate your conviction

On a scale of 0 to 100, how strongly do you currently believe this? Note the number. You will return to it at the end.

Step 3 — Examine the evidence that supports the belief

List, as honestly as you can, all the evidence that seems to support the belief. Include the experiences from the toxic relationship, but also from earlier in your life. Be thorough — this is not an exercise in dismissing your experience.

Step 4 — Examine the evidence against the belief

This is the step that most people find genuinely difficult, because a deeply held negative core belief has a powerful filtering effect — it tends to allow confirming evidence through while screening out disconfirming evidence. You may need to look carefully and look back a long way.

Consider: times when you have been genuinely loved and valued. Relationships — romantic, friendship, family — in which care was consistent. Qualities in yourself that others have appreciated. Moments when you behaved with warmth, generosity, or integrity. The fact that you are reading this book — which is itself evidence of something.

Step 5 — Consider alternative explanations

For the experiences in column three — the evidence that seems to support the belief — are there alternative explanations that do not require the belief to be true? Could the toxic relationship have ended, or been harmful, because of the other person's limitations rather than your fundamental unlovability? Could earlier experiences of rejection reflect the capacity of the people involved rather than your intrinsic worth?

Step 6 — Construct a balanced alternative

Based on all of the evidence — both for and against — write a more balanced, more accurate statement about yourself. This is not the opposite of the core belief. It is a nuanced, evidence-based account that holds the complexity honestly.

Example: I have had experiences that taught me I was difficult to love. Some of those experiences involved people who were genuinely unable to love me well — not because of my fundamental worth, but because of their own limitations and the dynamics we created together. There is also evidence that I am capable of being loved, and of loving. The belief that I am fundamentally unlovable is a conclusion drawn from painful but limited experience, and it is not the whole truth about me.

Step 7 — Re-rate your conviction

Return to your 0–100 rating from Step 2. Where is your conviction in the original belief now? Even a small reduction — from 85 to 75, from 70 to 60 — is meaningful. Core beliefs do not dissolve in a single sitting. They erode gradually, through repeated examination and through the accumulation of new experience. Every point of movement is progress.

Cognitive distortions — the thinking patterns that maintain the belief

Alongside the thought record, CBT identifies a set of cognitive distortions — systematic errors in thinking that tend to maintain and reinforce negative core beliefs. Recognising these distortions in your own thinking is an important part of the work, because they operate largely automatically and invisibly until they are named.

All-or-nothing thinking

Seeing situations in absolute, binary terms — wholly good or wholly bad, complete success or complete failure, entirely loveable or entirely unlovable. All-or-nothing thinking leaves no room for the nuance and complexity that characterises most human experience. It tends to produce extreme emotional responses to relatively ordinary events, because the stakes of any situation are inflated to existential proportions.

Catastrophising

Consistently assuming the worst possible outcome — that a difficult situation will escalate into disaster, that a moment of rejection signals permanent unlovability, that a new person's withdrawal confirms the core belief definitively and for ever. Catastrophising is closely

related to the hypervigilant nervous system state explored in Part Two — it is, in part, the cognitive expression of a threat-alert system that has been calibrated to expect the worst.

Mind reading

Assuming that you know what another person is thinking — usually assuming negative judgment — without adequate evidence. Mind reading is extremely common among people who developed hypervigilance in a toxic relationship, because reading the other person's mood and anticipating their reactions was a survival strategy. In safer contexts, this capacity for attunement can be a strength. When it is running on the assumption that the reading will always be negative, it becomes a source of significant unnecessary suffering.

Personalisation

Taking excessive responsibility for events and outcomes that are not, in fact, primarily caused by you. In the context of a toxic relationship, personalisation is often the direct result of sustained gaslighting — the systematic attribution of relational difficulty to your failings. A person who has been repeatedly told that problems in the relationship are their fault learns to

personalise as a default. Recognising this pattern is one of the most important steps toward releasing the weight of false responsibility.

Emotional reasoning

Treating a feeling as evidence of fact — I feel unlovable, therefore I am unlovable. I feel like a burden, therefore I am one. I feel like the relationship ended because of my deficiencies, therefore it did. Emotional reasoning is particularly powerful because feelings feel true in a way that abstract propositions do not. But feelings are not facts. They are the products of belief systems, nervous system states, and interpretive habits — all of which can be mistaken.

The compassionate reframe — speaking to yourself as you would to someone you love

Alongside the more analytical work of the thought record, there is a complementary approach that works at a different level — one that engages not just the thinking mind but the emotional and relational self. It is the practice of compassionate reframing, and it draws on the growing body of research into self-compassion developed by psychologist Kristin Neff.

The practice is simple in description and genuinely challenging in execution. When you notice the core belief activated — when the inner critic is running,

when the voice is telling you that you are unlovable, too much, not enough, the problem — you pause. You notice the pain of that experience, without minimising it and without being swept away by it. And then you ask: if someone I love were feeling exactly this, what would I say to them?

The answer to that question is almost always more generous, more accurate, and more useful than the answer the inner critic provides. The inner critic applies a standard of judgment to you that you would never apply to someone you care about. The compassionate reframe asks you to extend to yourself the same quality of response that you would naturally extend to another.

This is not sentimental and it is not easy. For people who grew up in environments where self-compassion was not modelled — where self-criticism was the price of belonging — treating themselves with genuine kindness can feel uncomfortable, indulgent, or simply foreign. It is a practice, and like all practices it develops through repetition rather than through a single act of will.

Behavioural experiments — testing the belief in the world

One of the most powerful tools in CBT for changing core beliefs is the behavioural experiment — a deliberate, designed test of the belief in real experience. The logic is straightforward: if the belief I am unlovable is maintained partly by avoiding situations in which it might be disconfirmed, then deliberately entering those situations — carefully, thoughtfully, with appropriate support — provides new evidence that the belief cannot accommodate.

A behavioural experiment for the belief I am unlovable might begin very small — sharing something genuine with a trusted friend and noticing their response. Allowing someone to do something kind for you without immediately deflecting or minimising. Expressing a need and observing what actually happens. Each small experiment produces data. Each piece of data that does not confirm the belief is a small increment of erosion in its foundations.

Behavioural experiments work most effectively when they are designed thoughtfully — starting with situations that carry relatively low stakes and building gradually toward more challenging territory. They are not about forcing yourself into vulnerability before you

are ready. They are about creating, deliberately and carefully, the conditions for new experience to accumulate.

You are not unlovable. You never were. The belief that you are is a conclusion drawn from the evidence of relationships that could not love you well — not because of what you are, but because of what they were. The work of this chapter is not to convince you of your worth through argument. It is to build, carefully and honestly, a more accurate account of yourself — one that the evidence, examined properly, actually supports.

Part Three is now complete. In Part Four we make the turn that is at the heart of this book — from understanding what was done to you, to owning what you now know about yourself, and learning to use your deepest vulnerabilities not as wounds to be hidden, but as the most precise compass you have for choosing love well.

Practice — Chapter Eleven

This chapter's practice is the core belief thought record described above. Work through it with the belief that felt most alive for you in Chapter 8 — whichever one produced the strongest sense of recognition.

A few guidelines for getting the most from the exercise:

- Do it on paper, not in your head. The act of writing creates distance and clarity that mental rehearsal cannot replicate.
- Take your time with Step 4 — the evidence against. This is the step the belief will resist most strongly. Stay with it. Look further back than the toxic relationship. Look at the whole of your experience.
- The balanced alternative in Step 6 does not need to feel true yet. It needs to be accurate — to honestly reflect all the evidence, not just the confirming evidence. Feeling follows belief revision, not the other way around.
- Return to this exercise regularly — weekly if possible — using the same belief

or different ones as they become apparent. Core belief work is cumulative. The change happens over time, not in a single sitting.

As a second practice, choose one cognitive distortion from the list in this chapter that feels most familiar in your own thinking. Over the next week, simply notice when it appears — without trying to change anything, just observing. Awareness of a pattern is the first condition of changing it.

A note on the tools in this chapter: the thought record and cognitive distortions draw directly on Aaron Beck's CBT model and the clinical developments of his colleagues, including Judith Beck whose Cognitive Behavior Therapy: Basics and Beyond (1995, updated 2021) is the standard clinical text. The compassionate reframing approach draws on Kristin Neff's self-compassion research, described accessibly in Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself (2011). Full references are provided at the end of this book.

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Part Four — Owner

Your Vulnerabilities as Your Compass

Part Four covers Chapters 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16. This is the turning point of the book — the movement from understanding what was done to you, toward claiming what you now know about yourself. It requires something that the earlier parts have been preparing you for: the willingness to step out of the position of someone things happen to, and into the position of someone who chooses what comes next. This is not a small thing. It is the most important thing.

Chapter Twelve

Stepping Out of Victimhood — Owning Your Story

There is a word in this chapter's title that I want to address before we go any further, because it is a word that can produce resistance — sometimes fierce resistance — in people who have been genuinely harmed.

Victimhood.

Let me be absolutely clear about what I am and am not saying when I use this word. I am not saying that you were not a victim. You were. What was done to you — the control, the criticism, the gaslighting, the erosion of your identity and your self-worth — was real harm, done by a real person, and you did not deserve it. That is not in question. It will never be in question in these pages.

What I am talking about when I use the word victimhood is something different. It is a psychological position — a way of relating to your experience and to the world — that can persist long after the harm has ended. And it is a position that, however

understandable, however earned, ultimately keeps you in the story of what was done to you rather than in the story of what you are choosing to do next.

Stepping out of victimhood is not about forgiving the person who hurt you. It is not about minimising what happened. It is not about pretending the wound was not real or that the recovery is complete. It is about something much simpler and much more radical: deciding that what happened to you will be part of your story, but it will not be the whole of it. And that what comes next is yours to write.

The victim position revisited

In Chapter 2 we looked at the Drama Triangle and the Victim role within it. We noted that the Victim position — in Karpman's framework — is not the same as being genuinely victimised, though the two can overlap. The Victim role is characterised by a sense of powerlessness, a belief that one cannot change one's circumstances, and a way of experiencing the self as someone things happen to rather than someone who acts.

The Victim position has its own logic and its own payoffs — not in a cynical sense, but in the sense that every psychological position we maintain is serving some function. The Victim position offers, among other things, a coherent explanation for suffering, a degree of protection from the risk of new action, and a

framework within which other people's support and sympathy make sense. These are real and understandable functions. They are not trivial. And they are also, ultimately, costly — because the price of the Victim position is agency. While I am in the position of someone things happen to, I am not in the position of someone who can choose, act, and change.

In TA terms, moving out of the Victim position means moving toward what is sometimes called the Winner's Triangle — the healthy alternative to the Drama Triangle, in which the Victim role is replaced by something more powerful: the position of the Vulnerable person who can acknowledge difficulty and ask for help without collapsing into helplessness. Who can say this happened, and it hurt, and I am still standing, and I am choosing what comes next.

The difference between acknowledgement and identification

One of the most important distinctions in this chapter is the difference between acknowledging that you were victimised and identifying as a victim. The first is true and necessary — it is part of the honest account of your experience that this book has been supporting you to build. The second is a choice about how you position yourself in relation to that experience going forward.

Acknowledgement says: what happened was real, it caused real harm, and I do not minimise it. Identification says: what happened to me defines me. The first is clarity. The second is a prison — not because you locked yourself in, but because you were put there by someone else's behaviour, and staying there gives them a permanent residence in your present and your future.

I have worked with people who, years and even decades after leaving harmful relationships, are still primarily organised around what was done to them. Their identity is structured around the harm. Their relationships are filtered through it. Their choices are constrained by it. This is not weakness or self-indulgence. It is the long shadow of unresolved trauma, combined with the absence of a compelling alternative story — a different account of who they are and what they are capable of.

This chapter is about finding that alternative story. And the first step is understanding that you are not only the person something happened to. You are also the person who survived it, who is understanding it, who is doing the work of recovery, who is reading these pages, who is — even now, even here — choosing something different.

Ownership – what it actually means

Ownership, as I am using the word here, does not mean responsibility for what was done to you. It does not mean that the harm was your fault, that you should have left sooner, that you caused the dynamic. None of those things are true and I am not saying any of them.

What ownership means is this: taking an active, engaged, authorial relationship to your own experience — past, present and future. It means being the subject of your own story rather than its object. It means recognising that while you could not control what happened to you, you can choose how you understand it, what you take from it, what you do with what you have learned, and what kind of life and love you build in its wake.

In psychological terms, this is the territory of what researchers call the internal locus of control — the degree to which a person understands themselves as the agent of their own experience rather than the recipient of external forces. People with a strong internal locus of control are not people who believe they can control everything that happens to them. They are people who believe that their responses, their choices, their interpretation of events, matter — that they are not simply leaves in the current of circumstances but actors with genuine influence over the shape of their own lives.

Developing a stronger internal locus of control after a toxic relationship is not about pretending that external circumstances do not affect you. It is about reclaiming the conviction — which the relationship may have systematically eroded — that you have agency. That you have a role in what comes next. That you are not simply waiting to see what happens to you.

The three questions of ownership

In my clinical practice I have found three questions particularly useful for supporting the shift from victimhood to ownership. They are not easy questions. They require honesty and they require a degree of nervous system regulation — which is why they belong here, in Part Four, rather than at the beginning of the book. If you had been asked these questions in the immediate aftermath of the relationship they would likely have produced shame or defensiveness. Now, with the work of the previous eleven chapters behind you, they are more likely to produce clarity.

What did this experience reveal about me — in ways I can use?

Not what did it reveal about my flaws or failures — but what did it reveal about my depth, my capacity for love, my resilience, my sensitivity, my willingness to commit, my ability to survive something genuinely

difficult? What do you know about yourself now that you could not have known before? What qualities did the experience call forward in you — even the painful ones — that are genuinely yours and that you can carry forward?

What did this experience teach me about what I need?

The toxic relationship, for all its damage, produced an extremely detailed map of what you cannot thrive without — and what you cannot thrive within. You know, with a precision that many people never develop, what genuine safety feels like in the body and what its absence feels like. You know what it costs you to suppress your needs and what it feels like when your needs are met with contempt. You know what you will not accept, perhaps more clearly than you have ever known it before. This knowledge is not nothing. It is, in fact, one of the most valuable things you possess as you move toward choosing a new relationship.

What story do I want to tell about this — not for others, but for myself?

Not the story that justifies staying, or the story that explains everything through the other person's deficiencies, or the story that casts you as irreparably damaged. But the true story — the one that holds the

complexity honestly, that acknowledges the harm and the love and the confusion and the survival, and that has a forward direction. What is the story of this experience that serves your growth rather than your constriction? That leaves you larger rather than smaller? That makes you the protagonist of your own life rather than a supporting character in someone else's?

Ownership is not blame. It is not the verdict that you caused what happened or that you should have known better. It is something far more powerful: the decision that what happened to you will inform your future without determining it. That you are the author of what comes next. That the story is not over — and that you are holding the pen.

From surviving to choosing

There is a particular quality of aliveness that I have watched emerge in people as they make this transition — from the position of someone who survived something, to the position of someone who is actively choosing what comes next. It is not dramatic. It does not arrive in a single moment of revelation. It arrives quietly, incrementally, in the accumulation of small decisions made from a sense of agency rather than reaction — in the choice to be honest about what you

need, to decline what does not serve you, to move toward what genuinely interests you, to allow yourself to want things.

This quality of aliveness — of being genuinely present as the author of your own experience — is the foundation on which everything that follows in this book is built. The vulnerability explored in Chapter 13, the needs communication of Chapter 14, the boundaries work of Chapter 15, the dating readiness of Chapter 16 — all of it depends on this prior shift. Not on perfection, not on complete healing, but on the decision — however provisional, however tentative — to step out of the story of what was done to you and into the story of what you are choosing to do next.

That decision is available to you right now. It does not require that the healing is complete. It simply requires that you are willing.

Reflection — Chapter Twelve

Settle yourself before you begin. This chapter has asked something significant of you and it is worth arriving fully before you move into reflection.

In your journal, work with the following:

- Sit honestly with the distinction between being victimised and living in the victim position. Can you recognise, without self-blame, any ways in which you have been organising your life around what happened to you — keeping the harm at the centre of your identity, filtering new experiences through it, allowing it to constrain your choices?
- Work through the three questions of ownership, taking each one seriously and writing your responses in as much detail as they require. What did this experience reveal about you that you can use? What did it teach you about what you need? What story do you want to tell about it — for yourself?
- What would it feel like — in your body, not just in your thoughts — to make the shift from surviving to choosing? Not as a permanent, completed transformation,

but as a decision available to you in this moment. Can you feel any quality of that shift as you sit with the question?

- Write one sentence that begins: From this point, I am choosing...

That sentence does not need to be grand or certain. It simply needs to be true. And it needs to come from you.

*A note on the material in this chapter: the concept of internal versus external locus of control originates in the work of Julian Rotter, described in his 1966 paper *Generalised Expectancies for Internal versus External Control of Reinforcement*. The Winner's Triangle as a healthy alternative to the Drama Triangle is developed by Acey Choy in her 1990 paper *The Winner's Triangle*, published in the *Transactional Analysis Journal*. Full references are provided at the end of this book.*

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Chapter Thirteen

Your Sensitivity Is Not Your Weakness — It Is Your Compass

Almost everyone who has come through a toxic relationship carries, somewhere in the residue of it, a version of the same conclusion: that their sensitivity was the problem. That they felt too much, needed too much, noticed too much. That their capacity for depth and connection — the very qualities that drew them into love in the first place — were liabilities. Vulnerabilities that left them open to harm. Evidence of a flaw that a stronger, less feeling person would not have.

This chapter is a direct challenge to that conclusion.

Not a gentle reframe. Not a consolation. A direct, clinical, evidence-grounded argument that your sensitivity — your depth, your capacity for attunement, your emotional intelligence, your ability to feel the quality of a connection rather than simply its surface — is not what made you vulnerable to harm. It is what makes you capable of the most genuine, most nourishing, most real kind of love. And it is, when

understood and used deliberately, the most precise instrument you have for choosing a partner who is actually right for you.

What sensitivity actually is

The word sensitive is used in common parlance as a mild criticism — shorthand for someone who overreacts, takes things personally, or needs more than their fair share of emotional management. Used in this way it carries an implicit comparison to some ideal of emotional robustness that is, in fact, neither achievable nor desirable.

What sensitivity actually describes, in psychological terms, is a heightened responsiveness to the emotional and relational environment — a finer-grained capacity to register what is happening between people, to notice subtleties of tone and atmosphere, to feel the emotional texture of a situation rather than merely its facts. Elaine Aron's research on what she calls the Highly Sensitive Person identifies this trait as present in approximately fifteen to twenty percent of the population, equally distributed across genders, and associated with greater depth of processing of both sensory and emotional information.

Sensitivity in this sense is not pathology. It is not weakness. It is a neurological trait — a difference in how the nervous system processes information — that carries both costs and considerable gifts. The costs are

real: greater susceptibility to overstimulation, greater impact from harsh or chaotic environments, greater difficulty recovering from relational harm. But the gifts are equally real: greater capacity for empathy, for attunement, for depth of connection, for noticing what others miss, for responding to the emotional needs of the people one loves with unusual accuracy and care.

The person who hurt you did not target you because you were sensitive. They were drawn to you, in part, because of the quality of attention and care your sensitivity makes available. What they could not offer in return — the reciprocity, the safety, the emotional availability that genuine connection requires — was their limitation. Not yours.

The vulnerability paradox

Here is the paradox at the heart of this chapter, and at the heart of this book: the qualities that made you most vulnerable in the toxic relationship are the same qualities that make you most capable of genuine intimacy.

Your capacity to love deeply made you susceptible to a relationship that exploited that depth. But the answer is not to love less deeply. The answer is to love with more discernment — to bring your capacity for depth into contact with people who have the capacity to meet it.

Your sensitivity to emotional atmosphere made you exquisitely attuned to the other person's moods, needs and states — often at the expense of your own. But the answer is not to become less attuned. The answer is to turn that attunement inward as well as outward — to use it to read your own experience with the same precision you apply to reading others.

Your need for genuine connection — for real intimacy rather than its surface performance — made you stay longer than was good for you in a relationship that occasionally provided something that felt like the real thing. But the answer is not to suppress that need or pretend it does not exist. The answer is to become more precise about what genuine connection actually feels like — in your body, in your nervous system, in the quality of ease and aliveness it produces — and to use that precision as a selection criterion.

Your vulnerabilities as a map of your needs

One of the most useful reframes available to you at this point in the journey is this: everything the toxic relationship revealed as a vulnerability is also a precise map of what you genuinely need in a relationship.

If you were deeply wounded by inconsistency — by the unpredictable alternation of warmth and withdrawal — then consistency is one of your core

relational needs. Not a preference. A need. The person who is right for you will be someone whose emotional availability is fundamentally reliable — not perfect, not constant, but trustworthy in the way that matters most to your particular nervous system.

If you were deeply wounded by contempt — by the consistent communication that your feelings, your needs, your very presence were somehow excessive or inconvenient — then genuine respect is one of your core relational needs. Not politeness. Not tolerance. But the kind of deep, active regard for who you are that makes you feel not just accepted but genuinely valued.

If you were deeply wounded by the suppression of your authentic self — by the requirement to make yourself smaller, quieter, less than you are — then a relationship that can hold the full range of who you are is one of your core relational needs. You need a partner who is not threatened by your depth, not diminished by your intelligence, not destabilised by your feeling.

This is not a wish list. It is a clinical specification — derived from precise knowledge of what you cannot thrive without, knowledge earned through the hardest possible curriculum. Most people entering relationships do so with a vague sense of what they want. You have something far more valuable: a detailed, experience-tested understanding of what you actually need.

Using your body as the instrument

The compass I am describing in this chapter is not primarily a cognitive tool. It is not a checklist or a scoring system for potential partners. It is something more immediate and more reliable than that — the signal of your own regulated nervous system in the presence of a person who is genuinely safe.

In Chapter 4 we explored Porges's concept of neuroception — the nervous system's continuous, unconscious scanning for cues of safety or danger. We noted that in the aftermath of a toxic relationship, neuroception can be temporarily miscalibrated — reading safety as boring and chaos as love, because chaos is familiar and familiarity is what the nervous system uses as a proxy for safety.

Part of the work of Chapters 4 through 7 was precisely this recalibration — the gradual re-education of the nervous system about what safety actually feels like. And a regulated, recalibrated nervous system is one of the most reliable instruments available for assessing whether a potential partner is genuinely safe — because genuine safety produces a specific, recognisable quality of felt experience that is very different from the anxious excitement of a familiar but dangerous dynamic.

Safe connection, in a regulated nervous system, tends to feel like ease. Like the ability to be yourself without monitoring. Like a quality of aliveness that

does not depend on intensity or drama. Like the capacity to disagree without dread. Like being interested in the other person without being consumed by them. Like warmth that settles rather than activates.

This felt sense of ease is not the absence of chemistry. It is chemistry of a different and better kind — the chemistry of genuine compatibility rather than the neurochemical urgency of a trauma-bonded dynamic. It may feel less exciting at first, to a nervous system trained to experience love as high-stakes and unpredictable. But it is the feeling to move toward. And your sensitivity — your finely tuned capacity to register the quality of connection rather than merely its surface — is exactly what makes you capable of recognising it.

Selectivity as self-respect

I want to introduce a frame that I find consistently useful with clients who are beginning to date again after a toxic relationship: the frame of selectivity rather than defensiveness.

There is a significant difference between protecting yourself from people and selecting toward people who are right for you. Protection is reactive — it scans for threat, builds walls, approaches dating as a risk management exercise. Selectivity is active — it knows

what it is looking for, brings its full self to the encounter, and makes deliberate choices based on what it genuinely observes rather than what it fears.

The person who dates from a position of selectivity is not guarded. They are discerning. They bring warmth and openness to new connections — because they are not frightened of people, they are simply clear about what they need. And when what they need is not present — when the connection, however pleasant, does not have the quality of ease and genuine regard that their nervous system recognises as right — they are able to move on without catastrophe. Not every person who is lovely is the right person. Knowing this, and being at peace with it, is one of the most important capacities you can develop.

The gift you did not ask for

I want to say something here that I always say with care, because it can be misread as a minimisation of suffering — and it is the opposite of that.

The toxic relationship gave you something that most people who have only ever lived in comfortable relationships do not have. It gave you a depth of self-knowledge — about your needs, your limits, your values, your capacity for resilience — that could not have been acquired any other way. It gave you a precise and detailed understanding of what genuine

safety feels like by contrast with its absence. It gave you, at great cost, exactly the knowledge you need to choose better.

This does not make what happened acceptable. It does not mean it was worth it or that it happened for a reason. It simply means that the knowledge is real, it is yours, and you can use it. The person who went through this and did the work of understanding it is, in some genuinely important ways, more equipped for the love they want than they were before it happened.

You now know yourself more deeply than most people ever will. You know what you cannot live without and what you will not accept. You know the difference between intensity and safety, between familiarity and rightness, between someone who needs you and someone who can genuinely meet you. That knowledge is not a consolation prize. It is a compass. And it is pointing, if you will let it, directly toward the love you deserve.

In Chapter 14 we turn to the practical work of learning to identify and communicate your needs — because knowing what you need is only the first part of the work. Learning to ask for it, without shame and without apology, is what makes a genuinely different kind of relationship possible.

Reflection — Chapter Thirteen

Take your time with this one. It asks for a quality of self-regard that may feel unfamiliar — perhaps even uncomfortable. Stay with it.

In your journal, work through the following:

- Make a list of the qualities in yourself that the toxic relationship taught you to see as problems — too sensitive, too intense, too feeling, too needing, too much. Write them down without editing or softening them.
- Now, for each quality on that list, write a reframe. Not a positive spin — a genuine reframe that acknowledges both the cost and the gift of that quality. Too sensitive becomes: I register the emotional quality of a situation with unusual accuracy. Too needing becomes: I know what genuine connection requires and I will not settle for its imitation. Too much becomes: I bring a depth and authenticity to relationship that not everyone can meet — and that is information about them, not a verdict about me.
- Now turn to your vulnerabilities — the specific wounds of the toxic relationship.

For each one, write the relational need it reveals. Wounded by inconsistency: I need a partner whose availability is fundamentally reliable. Wounded by contempt: I need a partner who holds genuine respect for who I am. Take as much space as you need.

- Finally: imagine a relationship in which everything on that list of needs was met — not perfectly, not always, but consistently and genuinely. What does that relationship feel like in your body? What quality does it have? Sit with that image. That is what your compass is pointing toward.

Keep this list. It is one of the most important things you will write in the course of reading this book.

*A note on the material in this chapter: the research on the Highly Sensitive Person is drawn from the work of Elaine Aron, described in *The Highly Sensitive Person* (1996). The concept of neuroception and its role in assessing safety is Stephen Porges's, developed in *The Polyvagal Theory* (2011). The distinction between the neurochemistry of trauma bonding and the felt sense of genuine secure*

connection draws on both Porges's work and Sue Johnson's EFT framework in Hold Me Tight (2008). Full references are provided at the end of this book.

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Chapter Fourteen

Learning to Identify and Voice Your Needs

There is a particular kind of confusion that many survivors of toxic relationships describe when asked, simply and directly, what they need. Not an intellectual confusion — they can usually produce a list of things that would be nice, things that would help, things they have learned to do without. What they describe is something more fundamental: a disconnection from the actual felt sense of needing. A difficulty knowing, from the inside, what they genuinely require — not as a performance of reasonableness, not as a request calibrated to what is likely to be acceptable, but as an honest account of what their particular self, in this particular moment, actually needs in order to feel safe, met, and genuinely present in a relationship.

This disconnection is not coincidental. It is the direct result of living, for an extended period, in an environment where needs were unsafe. Where expressing a need produced contempt, withdrawal, criticism, or punishment. Where the only viable

strategy was to suppress, minimise, or entirely disconnect from the experience of needing — because needing, in that environment, only made things worse.

This chapter is about finding your way back to your needs. And then — which is a separate and equally important step — learning to voice them.

What needs are — and what they are not

In the framework of Emotionally Focused Therapy, developed by Sue Johnson and drawing directly on Bowlby's attachment theory, emotional needs in relationships are not regarded as weaknesses, demands, or evidence of dependency. They are regarded as the fundamental currency of attachment — the natural, healthy, universal human requirements for connection, safety, and the felt sense of being genuinely important to another person.

Johnson identifies several core attachment needs that operate in every significant relationship: the need to know that the other person is accessible — that they are present and paying attention; the need to know that the other person is responsive — that they will reply to a bid for connection rather than ignore or dismiss it; and the need to know that the other person is engaged — that they genuinely care about what happens to you. She describes this as the ARE model: Accessible, Responsive, Engaged. When these needs are consistently met, attachment security develops.

When they are consistently unmet, the attachment system activates — producing the anxiety, pursuit, withdrawal, and emotional flooding that characterise insecure relating.

Needs, in this framework, are not the same as wants. Wants are preferences — things that would be nice but whose absence does not fundamentally threaten the relational foundation. Needs are the structural requirements of secure connection — the things without which the relationship cannot provide the safety and belonging that attachment requires. Knowing the difference between your wants and your needs is one of the most practically useful things you can develop in preparation for a new relationship.

Why needs became dangerous

For many people reading this book, the experience of expressing a need in the toxic relationship was consistently met with one of a small number of responses — all of them damaging in different ways.

The first is dismissal: your need is minimised, explained away, or simply ignored. You are told that you are too sensitive, that your need is unreasonable, that other people do not need that much. Over time, dismissal teaches you that your needs are excessive — that the wanting itself is the problem rather than the refusal to meet it.

The second is punishment: expressing a need produces withdrawal, anger, or increased hostility. The message is that needing things from this person is threatening to them, and that the cost of expressing a need is greater than the cost of suppressing it. Over time, punishment teaches you to silence yourself before the need can be voiced — to manage the other person's response by eliminating the stimulus.

The third is weaponisation: the need, once expressed, is used against you — mocked, stored for future deployment in arguments, or held as evidence of your inadequacy. Weaponisation produces perhaps the most profound suppression of all, because it teaches you that vulnerability itself is dangerous. That to reveal what you need is to hand someone a means of harming you.

Any one of these responses, experienced consistently over time, would be sufficient to produce a significant disconnection from the experience of needing. All three together — which is the experience of many people who have lived through a toxic relationship — produce a disconnection so thorough that it can persist long after the relationship has ended, shaping every subsequent attempt at intimacy.

Reconnecting with your needs — the body first

Because the disconnection from needs is, at its root, a somatic experience — a shutting down of bodily sensation and internal signal — the path back to needs runs through the body rather than the thinking mind. You cannot think your way back to your needs. You have to feel your way back.

The practice of noticing internal signals — the felt sense of something being right or wrong, comfortable or uncomfortable, nourishing or depleting — is the foundation of needs awareness. It is closely related to the nervous system literacy developed in Part Two, and it draws on the same quality of non-judgmental attention to bodily experience.

A useful starting point is the practice of regularly asking yourself, in low-stakes situations, what feels right and what does not. Not what is reasonable, not what you think you should want, but what actually feels nourishing versus what feels depleting. Which conversations leave you feeling more yourself, and which leave you feeling smaller? Which environments settle you, and which activate you? Which kinds of contact feel genuinely connecting, and which feel performed or effortful?

These are small questions, and they produce small answers. But the practice of asking them — of attending to your own internal signals with curiosity and without dismissal — gradually rebuilds the connection between your experience and your awareness of it. It begins to restore the capacity for self-knowledge that the toxic relationship worked so hard to destroy.

The language of needs — from complaint to request

Once you have begun to reconnect with your needs at the level of felt experience, the next step is learning to give them language — to express them in a way that is clear, honest, and likely to be heard.

One of the most useful frameworks for this is drawn from Non-Violent Communication, developed by Marshall Rosenberg. NVC distinguishes between four elements of authentic communication: observation, feeling, need, and request. The distinction between a complaint and a request is at the heart of this framework — and it is a distinction that makes an enormous practical difference to the quality of relational communication.

A complaint locates the problem in the other person's behaviour: you never make time for me. You always do this. You do not care about what I need.

Complaints produce defensiveness, because they are experienced as attacks — and a person who feels attacked is not in a position to be responsive to the underlying need the complaint is expressing.

A needs-based request locates the communication in your own experience and makes a specific, positive ask: when we have not had time together for a while, I feel disconnected and I start to worry about us. What I need is some reassurance that we are a priority to each other. Would you be willing to set aside some time this week just for the two of us?

The difference is not merely stylistic. It is the difference between a communication that invites connection and one that invites conflict. It is also, for many people who have lived through a toxic relationship, an entirely new way of speaking — one that requires practice, patience, and a willingness to be genuinely vulnerable rather than defensively indirect.

The fear beneath the silence

Most people who struggle to voice their needs are not struggling with language. They are struggling with fear. The fear that the need will be dismissed again. The fear that expressing vulnerability will be used against them again. The fear that asking for too much will drive the person away. The fear that their needs

are, fundamentally, excessive — that the core belief explored in Chapter 8 is true and that expressing their needs will simply provide further evidence of it.

These fears are understandable. They were learned in an environment that justified them. But they belong to a previous relational context — one that no longer applies, or need not apply — and carrying them forward into new relationships means allowing the toxic relationship to continue to shape your experience long after it has ended.

The work of voicing needs in a new relationship is not the work of becoming fearless. It is the work of acting in spite of the fear — of distinguishing between the old danger and the present situation, of giving the new person the opportunity to respond differently, and of using their actual response as data rather than confirmation of the old belief.

This requires regulation — which is why this chapter belongs in Part Four, after the nervous system work of Part Two and the cognitive work of Part Three. A person who is significantly dysregulated is not in a position to voice needs clearly or to receive another person's response with any degree of accuracy. A person who is within their window of tolerance, grounded in their own identity, and operating from a sense of agency rather than fear, has a genuinely different experience of this conversation. They can ask. And they can hear the answer.

What a genuinely responsive partner looks like

In EFT, Sue Johnson describes the moment when a partner reaches toward the other with a genuine bid for connection — expressing a need clearly and vulnerably — and the other person turns toward that bid rather than away from it, as one of the most fundamental building blocks of secure attachment. She calls it an A.R.E. response — accessible, responsive, engaged. And she notes that it does not require perfection. It requires genuine effort, genuine attention, and a genuine willingness to be moved by what the other person needs.

As you step back into dating, pay attention to how people respond when you express something genuine — not a dramatic disclosure, but an honest moment of preference, need, or feeling. Do they turn toward it? Do they take it seriously? Do they make any effort to respond to it? Or do they dismiss it, redirect, minimise, or use it in some way that leaves you feeling less safe than you did before you spoke?

This is one of the most reliable early indicators of relational capacity you have available. Not what someone says about themselves, not how charming or interesting they are in the early weeks — but how they respond when you are genuinely, if modestly, real with them. The compass of Chapter 13 in action.

Learning to voice what you need is an act of profound self-respect. It says: I am real, I have needs, and I am worth the risk of asking. It also says something important to the people you are in relationship with: I trust you enough to be honest with you. That trust, extended carefully and gradually, is the beginning of genuine intimacy. Not the performance of it. The real thing.

In Chapter 15 we turn to the question of boundaries — a word that is used constantly in self-help literature and understood rarely. We will look at what genuine, values-based boundaries actually are, why they are different from the walls that fear builds, and how to hold them without guilt, apology, or collapse.

Reflection and Practice — Chapter Fourteen

This chapter's exercise has three parts. Work through them in order if you can — each builds on the previous one.

Part One — Needs inventory

In your journal, write a list of your core relational needs — the things without which you cannot genuinely thrive in an intimate relationship. Use the questions from Chapter 13 as a starting point if helpful. Be specific and be honest. Not what sounds reasonable, but what you actually need.

Examples to prompt: consistency and reliability; to be taken seriously when you express a feeling; to have your space and independence respected; to feel genuinely desired rather than merely convenient; to be able to disagree without dread; to feel that your presence is a source of pleasure rather than a source of difficulty.

Write as many as come, then identify the five that feel most fundamental — the ones whose absence would fundamentally undermine your ability to feel safe and genuinely present in a relationship.

Part Two — From complaint to request

Think of a need that went chronically unmet in the toxic relationship. Write it first as a complaint — the way you might have expressed it in the relationship, or wanted to. Then rewrite it using the NVC framework: observation, feeling, need, request. Notice the difference in what each version produces in you as you write it.

Part Three — A small experiment

In the coming week, choose one low-stakes situation — with a friend, a colleague, anyone in your life — and practice expressing a small, genuine need or preference directly. Not dramatically, not apologetically, just clearly and honestly. Notice what happens — both in the other person's response and in your own experience of having spoken.

- What did it feel like to ask?
- What happened when you did?
- What does their response tell you about the quality of that relationship?

This is not a test of the other person. It is practice — the gradual rebuilding of the capacity to be genuinely present in relationship.

*A note on the frameworks in this chapter: the ARE model — Accessible, Responsive, Engaged — is Sue Johnson's, developed in *Hold Me Tight* (2008) and *Love Sense* (2013).*

*The Non-Violent Communication framework is Marshall Rosenberg's, described in *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (2003). Full references are provided at the end of this book.*

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Chapter Fifteen

From Walls to Boundaries — Values-Led, Not Fear-Led

Boundaries is one of the most used and least understood words in contemporary self-help. It appears everywhere — in therapy rooms, on social media, in conversations between people who are trying to make sense of their relationships. And yet when I ask people in clinical sessions what they mean when they say they need better boundaries, the answers are often vague: something about not letting people treat them badly, about saying no more often, about protecting themselves.

These are not wrong answers. But they are incomplete ones. And the incompleteness matters — because a partial understanding of what boundaries actually are tends to produce a partial and often unhelpful version of them in practice.

This chapter offers a more precise account of what genuine boundaries are, where they come from, and how they differ from the walls that fear builds. It is, I think, one of the most important chapters in this book — because the ability to hold genuine boundaries is not

just a tool for protecting yourself from harm. It is the foundation of genuine intimacy. You cannot be truly close to someone without them. And you cannot hold them without knowing, clearly and deeply, who you are.

The difference between walls and boundaries

The most important distinction in this chapter is between walls and boundaries. They look similar from the outside — both involve limits, both involve saying no to certain things — but they are structurally and functionally completely different.

A wall is built from fear. Its purpose is to keep people out — to prevent any further harm by preventing genuine closeness. A wall does not discriminate between safe and unsafe people. It keeps everyone at the same distance, because the nervous system that built it has learned that closeness itself is the threat. Walls are not boundaries. They are the absence of boundaries — the substitution of universal distance for the more demanding and more rewarding work of genuine discernment.

A boundary is built from values. Its purpose is not to keep people out but to define the terms on which you are willing to let people in. A boundary says: this is who I am, this is what I need, this is what I will not

compromise — and within those terms, I am genuinely, warmly available for connection. A boundary is not a barrier to intimacy. It is the structure that makes intimacy possible — because without it, closeness requires self-erasure, and self-erased connection is not intimacy at all.

After a toxic relationship, the instinct to build walls is entirely understandable. The nervous system that has been damaged by closeness seeks safety in distance. But walls, however understandable, are ultimately as costly as the relationship that produced them — because they prevent not only harm but connection, not only pain but joy, not only the wrong people but the right ones.

The work of this chapter is to move from walls — the defensive structures of a frightened nervous system — to genuine boundaries, rooted in values, held with clarity and warmth, and capable of supporting rather than preventing the kind of love you are working toward.

Where genuine boundaries come from

Genuine boundaries do not come from rules about what other people are and are not allowed to do. They come from values — from the clear, honest account of what matters to you, what you need, and who you are, that the work of Part Three has been helping you develop.

In Chapter 10 we worked on values clarification — identifying the qualities of living that feel most genuinely important to you. In Chapter 14 we worked on needs — the structural requirements of secure connection without which you cannot truly flourish. Your boundaries are the natural expression of both of these. They are not arbitrary limits imposed on other people. They are the honest communication of what you require in order to be fully present, fully safe, and fully yourself in a relationship.

This is a significantly different frame from the way boundaries are usually discussed. The usual frame is protective — boundaries as a shield against people who might harm you. The frame I am offering is expressive — boundaries as an honest statement of who you are and what your life requires. Not a defence against the world, but an invitation to the people who can genuinely meet you within the terms you need.

This distinction has a practical consequence that is worth naming directly: values-based boundaries are much easier to hold than fear-based rules. A rule imposed from the outside — I will not tolerate X — requires constant vigilance and tends to collapse under pressure, particularly when the nervous system is activated. A boundary that arises naturally from a clear sense of self — I cannot be fully present in a relationship that does not offer Y, because Y is

fundamental to how I function — is held not through willpower but through self-knowledge. It does not feel like a fight. It feels like an honest statement of fact.

The guilt problem

Almost everyone who has come through a toxic relationship struggles with guilt around boundaries. The guilt takes different forms — sometimes it sounds like I am being selfish, sometimes like I am being unreasonable, sometimes like who am I to ask for that. But it is almost always present, and it is almost always rooted in the same place: a relational history in which having needs and limits was systematically punished, and in which the other person's comfort was consistently prioritised over your own.

The guilt is not evidence that the boundary is wrong. It is evidence that you learned, in an environment that required it, to distrust your own needs. It is the voice of the Adapted Child ego state described in Chapter 9 — the part of you that learned that making yourself acceptable required making yourself small.

I want to offer a reframe that I find genuinely useful in clinical work. Guilt, in the context of boundaries, almost always arises when we do something that violates a rule we have internalised — a rule that says: I should not inconvenience people, I should not disappoint people, I should not take up too much

space. These rules feel like ethical principles. They are not. They are survival strategies — learned in an environment where taking up space was dangerous — masquerading as ethics.

A genuine ethical principle asks: does this action cause harm to another person? A boundary that is held calmly, clearly, and without aggression does not cause harm to another person. It may disappoint them. It may inconvenience them. It may mean that the relationship cannot continue in the form they had hoped for. But disappointment and inconvenience are not harm. And protecting yourself from harm by being clear about what you need is not selfishness. It is self-respect — and without self-respect, you have nothing to bring to another person that is genuinely worth having.

How boundaries are held — tone, clarity and consistency

A boundary that is held with aggression is a wall. A boundary that is held apologetically is an invitation to be pushed. A genuine boundary is held with a quality that might be described as warm firmness — clear, calm, kind, and non-negotiable in the ways that matter.

The tone of a genuine boundary communicates: I am not attacking you, I am not punishing you, I am not angry at you — I am simply being honest about what I need and what I cannot compromise on. This tone is

possible because the boundary arises from values rather than from fear or resentment. It does not require the other person to be wrong in order for the boundary to be right. It simply requires you to be clear about yourself.

Clarity means being specific. Not I need you to be more respectful but I am not willing to continue a conversation in which I am spoken to with contempt. Not I need more of your time but I need us to have at least one evening a week that is genuinely ours. The more specific a boundary is, the easier it is to communicate, the clearer it is to the other person, and the easier it is to know whether it is being honoured.

Consistency means that a boundary means the same thing on Tuesday as it did on Saturday. One of the ways that boundaries erode — particularly for people with a history of people-pleasing — is through the accumulation of exceptions. Each exception feels reasonable in the moment. Cumulatively they render the boundary meaningless and teach the other person that persistence is the appropriate response to a limit. Consistency is not rigidity. It is the honest maintenance of the terms on which you are available for connection.

What happens when a boundary is not respected

This is, for many people, the most anxiety-producing question in the whole subject of boundaries — and it deserves a direct answer.

When a boundary is expressed clearly and calmly and is not respected — when it is argued with, dismissed, violated, or used as evidence of your unreasonableness — that response is information. Important, specific, clinically significant information. It tells you something about the other person's capacity for genuine relationship. It tells you something about whether the connection you are developing has the qualities that your compass, developed in Chapter 13, is pointing toward.

A person who can hear a clearly expressed boundary, take it seriously, and make a genuine effort to honour it — even if they find it difficult, even if they need to ask questions about it, even if it requires adjustment on their part — is someone with genuine relational capacity. A person who cannot do this — who experiences your boundary as an attack, a rejection, or an imposition — is someone whose relational capacity is limited in ways that are directly relevant to your wellbeing.

This is not a judgment of their worth as a person. It is an assessment of their suitability as a partner — for you, with your particular needs and your particular history. Not everyone is the right person. Knowing this, and being willing to act on it, is one of the most important expressions of self-respect available to you.

Walls keep everyone out. Boundaries let the right people in. A genuine boundary says: within these terms, I am fully available — open, warm, genuinely present, capable of real intimacy. It is not a barrier to love. It is the condition of it. And holding it is not the opposite of being loving. It is one of the most loving things you can do — for yourself, and for the person who is eventually going to be genuinely worthy of your trust.

Chapter 16 closes Part Four with the question that everything in this section has been building toward: how do you know when you are genuinely ready to date again? Not when the loneliness becomes unbearable, not when someone else thinks you should be, but when the work you have done — in your body, in your mind, in your sense of self — has genuinely prepared you to choose rather than simply reach.

Reflection and Practice — Chapter Fifteen

Settle yourself before you begin. This exercise asks for both honesty and a degree of self-compassion — hold both at once if you can.

Part One — Walls or boundaries?

In your journal, reflect honestly on the following questions:

- Since leaving the toxic relationship, have you noticed any ways in which you have been keeping people at a uniform distance — not making genuine discriminations between safe and unsafe, but simply keeping everyone out? What does that feel like from the inside?
- Can you identify any walls you have built — areas of yourself, topics of conversation, forms of closeness — that you have made unavailable across the board, regardless of who the person is or how they have behaved?
- What is the fear beneath each wall? Not what is the story you tell about it, but what is the actual felt fear that the wall is protecting you from?

Part Two — Your boundary map

Return to your values list from Chapter 10 and your needs list from Chapter 14. From these, identify three to five genuine boundaries — the specific terms on which you are and are not available for intimate connection. Write each one as a clear, specific statement that arises from a value or a need rather than from fear.

For each boundary, write:

- The value or need it expresses
- What honouring this boundary looks like in practice
- What it feels like in your body when this boundary is respected
- What it feels like when it is not

Part Three — The guilt audit

Choose one boundary from Part Two — ideally one that you have struggled to hold in the past. Sit with the guilt that arises when you imagine stating this boundary clearly to a new partner. Notice where you feel the guilt in your body. Notice what story it tells. Then ask yourself: is this guilt evidence that the boundary is harmful to another person, or is it evidence that I learned to distrust my own needs? Write your honest answer.

*A note on the material in this chapter: the distinction between walls and boundaries draws on concepts from both CBT and attachment theory, and on Brené Brown's research on vulnerability and wholehearted living, described in *Daring Greatly* (2012). The framing of boundaries as values-based rather than fear-based draws on Steven Hayes's *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*, described in *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life* (2005). The guilt reframe draws on the TA concept of injunctions — the early prohibitions described by Robert and Mary Goulding in *Changing Lives Through Redecision Therapy* (1979). Full references are provided at the end of this book.*

Boundaries rooted in values — not fear — change everything about how you show up. The Talk & Love™ *Back to Dating Hub* helps you bring that into real connection.

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Chapter Sixteen

Knowing When You Are Truly Ready

Of all the questions I am asked by people who have come through a toxic relationship, this is the one that arrives most often — and the one for which the answer is most frequently misunderstood. Am I ready to date again?

Most people are asking it in one of two ways. The first is a plea for permission — please tell me it is acceptable to want this, please tell me that wanting connection does not mean I have not done enough work, please tell me I am allowed to begin. The second is a request for reassurance — please tell me I will not make the same mistake again, please tell me I am protected now, please tell me that readiness is a guarantee of safety.

This chapter cannot offer either of those things, because neither is available. What it can offer is something more genuinely useful: a set of honest, clinically grounded markers — drawn from twenty years of practice — that distinguish genuine readiness from the more common states of loneliness-driven urgency, fear-driven avoidance, and the particular kind

of desperate hopefulness that arrives when the pain of the previous relationship has briefly receded but the healing has not yet gone very deep.

Readiness, as I am defining it here, is not the absence of fear. It is not the completion of healing. It is not a permanent state that once achieved cannot be lost. It is a sufficient foundation — a degree of somatic settling, cognitive clarity, identity groundedness, and relational self-knowledge — from which genuine choice becomes possible. Not certain. Not guaranteed. But possible.

What readiness is not

Before describing what genuine readiness looks like, it is worth spending a moment on several things that are commonly mistaken for it — because these states are real, they are understandable, and they produce enormous amounts of pain when they are acted on as though they were the real thing.

Loneliness is not readiness

Loneliness is one of the most powerful human experiences — genuinely painful in ways that are not metaphorical. Research by social neuroscientist John Cacioppo has shown that chronic loneliness activates the same neural pathways as physical pain and poses

significant risks to both mental and physical health. The longing for connection that loneliness produces is real, urgent, and entirely understandable.

But loneliness, in the absence of the other markers we will explore in this chapter, is not readiness. It is a state of need — and a state of need, when it drives the choice of a partner, tends to select for availability rather than suitability. The person who is loneliest tends to be most susceptible to whichever person appears most quickly and most prominently, rather than most genuinely compatible. Loneliness narrows the window of tolerance further, dysregulates the nervous system, and impairs exactly the discernment that genuine readiness requires.

If loneliness is the primary driver of the urge to date, the most honest thing to do is not to suppress that urge but to address the loneliness directly — through friendship, community, therapeutic support, and the gradual development of a life that is genuinely nourishing on its own terms. A full life is not a substitute for partnership. But it is a far better foundation for choosing one than an empty one.

The fading of acute pain is not readiness

There comes a point in recovery from a toxic relationship when the acute phase of pain begins to subside. The intrusive thoughts become less frequent. The grief feels less raw. It becomes possible to go a

day, then several days, without the relationship occupying the centre of your awareness. This is an important and welcome development. It is also frequently mistaken for readiness.

The fading of acute pain is a necessary condition for readiness. It is not a sufficient one. The deeper work — the somatic healing of the nervous system, the revision of core beliefs, the reclamation of identity, the development of genuine self-knowledge — can proceed quietly underneath the surface long after the acute pain has receded. And if it has not proceeded, stepping back into dating at this point tends to produce one of two outcomes: either a recreation of the previous dynamic with a different person, or a series of connections that feel hollow and unsatisfying because the capacity for genuine intimacy has not yet been restored.

External pressure is not readiness

Friends who think you have been alone long enough. Family members who want to see you happy. Well-meaning people who believe that the best way to get over someone is to get under someone else. The cultural narrative that treats being single beyond a certain point as a problem requiring solution.

None of these are reliable guides to your readiness. They are responding to their own discomfort with your situation — their own difficulty tolerating your pain,

their own beliefs about what a healthy adult life should look like. You are not obligated to resolve their discomfort by moving faster than is right for you. The pace of your recovery is yours to determine. And a relationship entered to satisfy other people's timelines rather than your own genuine readiness is a relationship that begins on the wrong foundation.

The markers of genuine readiness

The following markers are not a checklist to be completed in sequence. They are indicators — signs that the work of the previous chapters has gone deep enough that dating from a place of genuine choice, rather than urgency or avoidance, has become possible. You do not need to have achieved all of them perfectly. You need to be able to recognise most of them as genuinely present, rather than aspirationally true.

Your nervous system has found a degree of baseline settling

You are spending more time within your window of tolerance than outside it. You can be alone without it feeling like an emergency. You can encounter ordinary relational friction — a friend who is distracted, a colleague who is curt — without it sending your threat response into significant activation. You are not calm

all the time, and you do not need to be. But the chronic hypervigilance that characterised the post-relationship period has begun to soften. Your body has begun to register the present environment as distinct from the previous one.

You can be with yourself

This is perhaps the most underrated marker of readiness, and one of the most reliable. The capacity to be genuinely, comfortably alone — not just to tolerate solitude but to find real value in it, to use it, to be interested in your own company — is one of the strongest indicators that you are not entering dating from a place of self-avoidance or dysregulation-driven urgency. It does not mean you prefer solitude to connection. It means you are not fleeing from yourself into relationship.

The previous relationship is not still the primary lens

You can think about the previous relationship with increasing clarity and decreasing activation. You understand what happened — not perfectly, not without remaining questions, but with enough coherence that the story has a shape you can hold without being overwhelmed by it. You are not still

primarily defined by it. New experiences can be new rather than inevitably filtered through the template of what happened before.

This does not mean the previous relationship is fully resolved. Most significant relational experiences are never fully resolved in the sense of being completely emotionally neutral. It means that it is no longer running in the foreground of your awareness, shaping every new encounter as though it were a continuation of the previous one.

You have a genuine sense of what you are looking for

Not a list of superficial preferences, but the deeper knowledge developed in Chapters 13, 14 and 15 — a clear sense of your core needs, the values a relationship must honour, the qualities your nervous system recognises as safe and genuinely connecting. You are not approaching dating as a search for someone who is simply not the previous person. You are approaching it with a positive specification — a genuine understanding of what you are moving toward rather than only what you are moving away from.

You can hold the possibility of disappointment without it feeling catastrophic

Dating involves rejection, mismatch, and disappointment. It always does, for everyone. A person who is genuinely ready can hold this possibility without it collapsing into evidence of their fundamental unlovability, without it triggering a full nervous system threat response, and without it requiring the elimination of all risk as a condition of participating. They can be disappointed and recover. They can be rejected and continue. Not without pain — but without catastrophe.

You are curious rather than desperate

Perhaps the most telling phenomenological marker of readiness is the quality of the feeling that accompanies the prospect of dating. Desperation — the urgent, anxious, I-need-this-to-work quality — is a sign that dating is being entered from a state of need rather than genuine readiness. Curiosity — the open, interested, let-me-find-out quality — is a sign that you have enough of a foundation beneath you to approach new connection with genuine interest rather than survival-level urgency.

Curiosity does not mean indifference. It does not mean you do not care how things go. It means you are interested in what you discover — about the other

person, about yourself in relation to them, about what genuine compatibility might look and feel like — rather than primarily concerned with achieving a predetermined outcome.

Readiness is not the absence of fear. It is the presence of enough ground beneath you. Enough somatic settling, enough self-knowledge, enough clarity about what you need and who you are, that you can step into the uncertainty of new connection without being completely at its mercy. You will not be perfectly healed. You will not be guaranteed safe passage. You will simply be genuinely, honestly, choicefully yourself — which is the only foundation on which the love you want can actually be built.

Part Four is complete. In Part Five we move from the inner work to the outer world — from the private landscape of healing, identity and self-knowledge, to the living, breathing, uncertain territory of actually dating again. You are as ready as you need to be to continue.

Reflection — Chapter Sixteen

This chapter's reflection is an honest self-assessment. Approach it with as much candour as you can manage — not harsh self-judgment, but genuine, clear-eyed honesty.

Work through the six markers of genuine readiness described in this chapter. For each one, write a brief, honest assessment of where you currently are:

- **Nervous system baseline:** How much time are you currently spending within your window of tolerance? What are the remaining significant triggers? What has improved since the end of the relationship?
- **Capacity to be alone:** Can you be genuinely, comfortably alone — using solitude rather than merely tolerating it? Or does being alone still feel primarily like an absence to be filled?
- **The previous relationship as lens:** To what degree is the previous relationship still the primary filter through which you experience new people and new situations? Has that degree shifted since you began this book?

- **Sense of what you are looking for:** Can you articulate — specifically, from your values and needs work — what you are genuinely moving toward in a new relationship? Write it out.
- **Capacity to hold disappointment:** How do you currently respond, in your body and in your thinking, to the prospect of being rejected or mismatched? Is that response different from how it would have been six months ago?
- **Curiosity versus desperation:** When you imagine dating again, what is the dominant quality of the feeling — curiosity, interest, openness? Or urgency, anxiety, desperate hopefulness? Be honest. The answer is not a verdict — it is information.

Based on your honest assessment, where are you? Not where you think you should be — where you actually are. And what, if anything, needs a little more time or a little more work before the ground beneath you feels genuinely solid?

Whatever your answer, it is the right answer. There is no wrong place to be. There is only the honest account of where you are — which is always, always the place from which genuine movement becomes possible.

*A note on the material in this chapter: the research on loneliness and its neurological and physiological effects draws on the extensive work of John Cacioppo, summarised accessibly in *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008). The clinical markers of readiness draw on my own twenty years of practice working with individuals recovering from relational trauma, informed by the attachment and EFT frameworks of Bowlby, Ainsworth, and Johnson, and the nervous system frameworks of Porges and Siegel. Full references are provided at the end of this book.*

Readiness is not the absence of fear. It is the presence of enough ground beneath you. The Talk & Love™ *Back to Dating Hub* begins exactly here.

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Part Five — Author

Choosing Wisely This Time

Part Five covers Chapters 17, 18, 19 and 20. This is the part of the book where everything you have learned about yourself — your nervous system, your core beliefs, your identity, your needs, your boundaries, your readiness — meets the living, uncertain, genuinely exciting world of dating again. The inner work does not stop here. It simply begins to be expressed outward, in real encounters with real people, with all the uncertainty and possibility that entails.

Chapter Seventeen

Red Flags vs Healthy Discomfort — Recalibrating Your Radar

One of the most commonly asked questions I hear from people who are beginning to date again after a toxic relationship is this: how do I know if what I am feeling is a genuine warning sign or just my old anxiety running? How do I trust my instincts when my instincts led me wrong before? How do I tell the difference between something that is actually dangerous and something that only feels dangerous because safety feels unfamiliar?

These are not neurotic questions. They are precise, clinically important questions that get to the heart of one of the most significant challenges in post-toxic-relationship dating. And they deserve a precise, clinically honest answer.

The answer is not simple — which is itself important information. There is no formula, no checklist, no set of rules that will reliably distinguish a red flag from healthy discomfort in every situation. What there is, instead, is a set of principles — grounded in nervous system science, attachment theory, and the self-

knowledge you have been developing throughout this book — that make the distinction more accessible and more reliable over time.

The calibration problem

In Chapter 4 we introduced Porges's concept of neuroception — the nervous system's continuous, unconscious scanning of the environment for cues of safety or danger. We noted that in the aftermath of a toxic relationship, neuroception can become miscalibrated — trained to read danger in situations that are not actually dangerous, and in some cases to read familiarity as safety even when the familiar dynamic is harmful.

This miscalibration operates in two directions simultaneously, and both directions create problems.

The first direction is hypervigilance — the tendency to read threat everywhere, to interpret ordinary relational events as signs of impending harm. A new person who is occasionally quiet reads as emotionally withdrawn. A moment of natural friction reads as contempt. A difference of opinion reads as the beginning of a controlling dynamic. The threat-alert system, trained by a previous relationship to fire frequently and early, continues to fire at stimuli that do not actually warrant alarm.

The second direction is the familiarity trap — the tendency to experience genuinely harmful dynamics as comfortable simply because they are familiar. The nervous system uses familiarity as a proxy for safety. And if what is most familiar is chaos, unpredictability, and the anxious urgency of a trauma-bonded dynamic, then those things can feel — at a physiological level — like home. Like the real thing. Like chemistry. While genuine safety, consistency, and emotional availability can feel flat, boring, or somehow insufficient.

Both of these miscalibrations need to be understood and accounted for. A person who only addresses the first — who learns to manage their hypervigilance — but does not address the second, remains vulnerable to mistaking familiar harm for desirable intensity. A person who only addresses the second — who learns to resist the pull of familiar dynamics — but does not address the first, may find themselves avoiding genuine connection because it continues to feel threatening.

What a genuine red flag looks like

A genuine red flag is a pattern of behaviour — not a single incident, with rare exceptions — that provides reliable evidence of one of the following: a lack of genuine respect for your autonomy and personhood; a pattern of dishonesty or reality distortion; the use of emotional dynamics to control or manipulate; a consistent inability to take responsibility for the impact

of their behaviour; or a pattern of treatment that leaves you feeling worse about yourself rather than better.

Notice several things about this definition. First, it is about pattern rather than incident. Every person behaves badly sometimes. A single moment of sharpness, a single failure of attunement, a single evening when someone is preoccupied and not fully present — these are not red flags. They are the ordinary texture of human imperfection. A red flag is something that recurs — a consistent quality of treatment that, when you look at the pattern rather than the isolated incidents, communicates something reliable about how this person relates.

Second, genuine red flags tend to produce a specific quality of felt experience — one that is worth learning to recognise. They tend to produce a kind of shrinking — a sense of yourself becoming slightly smaller, slightly less certain, slightly less at ease in your own skin. They tend to produce the particular quality of hypervigilance that characterised the toxic relationship — the sense of monitoring, of scanning, of trying to anticipate what the other person needs in order to keep the atmosphere safe. They tend to produce confusion about your own perceptions — the beginning of the gaslighting dynamic in which you start to question whether what you observed was really what happened.

Specific patterns that warrant early attention

While every relationship is different and no list can be exhaustive, the following patterns in early dating warrant careful attention — not immediate exit, but genuine, clear-eyed observation.

Love bombing

An early intensity of attention, affection, and apparent connection that feels overwhelming in its speed and force. Love bombing is not the same as genuine enthusiasm — it is characterised by a quality of pressure, of expectation that the intensity will be reciprocated, and by a tendency to move the connection forward much faster than a genuinely secure person would be comfortable with. It activates the attachment system powerfully and can feel like the most real connection you have ever experienced. It is frequently the opening stage of a coercive or narcissistic relational dynamic.

Early criticism disguised as teasing

Consistent small put-downs delivered with humour — comments about your appearance, your intelligence, your choices, your feelings — that are retracted if challenged with the assertion that you are too sensitive

or cannot take a joke. This pattern establishes, very early, a dynamic in which criticism is permissible and your response to criticism is the problem. It is one of the most reliable early indicators of a contempt-based relational style.

Difficulty with your autonomy

Reactions of irritation, sulking, or emotional withdrawal when you make independent choices — see your own friends, hold your own opinions, decline an invitation, or express a preference that differs from theirs. Genuine respect for your autonomy is one of the most basic requirements of healthy relating. Its early absence is significant.

Inconsistency between words and behaviour

A persistent gap between what someone says about themselves and how they actually behave. Between the way they present their values and the choices those values are supposed to produce. Between the warmth they express verbally and the quality of attention they actually provide. Actions, consistently observed over time, are far more reliable data than self-descriptions — particularly self-descriptions produced in the evaluative context of early dating.

Your needs consistently coming second

A pattern in which the relationship consistently organises around the other person's needs, preferences and comfort, with little genuine curiosity about or responsiveness to yours. In the early stages of dating this can be subtle — easily explained as enthusiasm, as the other person being particularly engaged with their own life. Observed consistently over several weeks, it begins to constitute a pattern worth taking seriously.

What healthy discomfort looks like

Healthy discomfort is the activation that comes from genuine newness — from stepping into the uncertainty of a new relationship with a new person whose safety has not yet been established, from allowing yourself to be seen before you know how that will be received, from the natural vulnerability of early intimacy.

Healthy discomfort tends to produce anxiety that is diffuse rather than specific — a general nervousness about the situation rather than a nervous system response to a specific behaviour. It tends to produce the quality of self-consciousness rather than self-monitoring — the feeling of being visible rather than the feeling of needing to manage the other person's emotional state. And it tends to coexist with genuine curiosity, interest, and a quality of forward motion —

the sense that the discomfort is the price of something genuinely worth having rather than the warning of something genuinely dangerous.

Healthy discomfort is also consistent with a nervous system that is essentially settling in the other person's presence — even if it is simultaneously activated by the newness of the situation. If you can notice that, over the course of an encounter, you are becoming slightly more at ease rather than slightly less so — that the person's presence is broadly regulating rather than broadly dysregulating — that is important information. It is the body's version of a green flag.

The body as the primary instrument

We return here, inevitably and importantly, to the body. Because the most reliable instrument available to you for distinguishing red flags from healthy discomfort is not your thinking mind — which is too susceptible to rationalisation, to wishful interpretation, to the motivated reasoning that wants the new connection to be safe because wanting connection is so deeply human. It is your regulated nervous system, reading the actual quality of the encounter rather than the story you are telling yourself about it.

This is why the work of Part Two — the somatic settling, the window of tolerance practices, the development of nervous system literacy — is not merely preparation for dating. It is the instrument of

dating. The more regulated you are, the more accurate your body's reading of another person will be. The more familiar you are with the specific felt quality of safety — the ease, the settling, the capacity to be yourself without monitoring — the more reliably you will recognise its presence or absence in a new relationship.

This takes time. It takes practice. It takes the accumulated experience of multiple encounters, read with the attention and honesty this chapter is asking for. But it develops — and as it develops, the question that seemed so impossible at the beginning of this chapter becomes, gradually, more accessible.

Your instincts did not fail you before. Your instincts were working perfectly — they were simply operating from a miscalibrated system, in a context where familiar harm felt safer than unfamiliar safety. The work you have done in this book is the work of recalibration. Your radar is not broken. It is being reset. And the more time you spend in genuinely safe connection — with yourself, with people who are capable of genuine care — the more accurate it becomes.

Chapter 18 takes the work of this chapter into the specific context of first dates — the practical, grounded, nervous-system-informed approach to the most activating moment in the early dating process.

Reflection and Practice – Chapter Seventeen

Part One – Mapping your miscalibrations

In your journal, reflect honestly on both directions of the calibration problem described in this chapter:

- **Hypervigilance:** Can you identify specific triggers — specific behaviours, tones, silences, situations — that tend to activate your threat response even when the situation does not actually warrant it? Write them down. For each one, note what the trigger meant in the previous relationship, and ask honestly: does that meaning apply to this new context, or is it being carried forward from a context that no longer applies?
- **The familiarity trap:** Can you identify any ways in which intensity, unpredictability, or the anxious urgency of a developing connection has felt, in your experience, more like love than the calmer, more consistent quality of genuinely safe connection? What does familiar but potentially harmful feel like in your body? What does safe but unfamiliar feel like?

Part Two — Green flags

The discussion of red flags is important. Equally important, and less commonly discussed, is the development of a clear sense of what green flags look and feel like for you specifically — the early behaviours and qualities that indicate genuine relational capacity.

In your journal, write your own green flag list — drawing on your values, your needs, and the felt sense of safety developed through the practices in this book. Consider:

- How does genuine curiosity about you feel different from performed interest?
- What does being taken seriously feel like in your body?
- What are the small early behaviours that tell you a person has genuine respect for your autonomy?
- What does it feel like when a person's actions consistently match their words?
- What quality of conversation leaves you feeling more yourself rather than less?

Keep this list. Return to it after dates. Use it as one of your primary instruments of assessment — alongside the more immediate signal of your regulated nervous system.

*A note on the material in this chapter: the concept of neuroception and its role in assessing relational safety is Stephen Porges's, from *The Polyvagal Theory* (2011). The description of love bombing draws on the clinical literature on coercive control and narcissistic relating, including Lundy Bancroft's *Why Does He Do That?* (2002) — a book I would recommend to any reader who recognises significant control dynamics in their previous relationship. The familiarity trap concept draws on the trauma bonding literature, including Patrick Carnes's work on betrayal bonds. Full references are provided at the end of this book.*

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Chapter Eighteen

First Dates — Staying Regulated and Present

A first date after a toxic relationship is not the same as a first date in ordinary circumstances. It carries weight that ordinary first dates do not carry — the accumulated anxiety of what happened before, the self-consciousness of someone who has been hurt and is trying again, the particular vulnerability of a person who knows, now, what it costs to choose badly.

That weight is real. It does not need to be pretended away. But it does need to be understood — and managed with enough skill that it does not hijack the very encounter it is trying to protect you in.

This chapter is practical. It is about the specific, concrete, nervous-system-informed things you can do before, during, and after a first date to give yourself the best possible chance of being genuinely present — curious, open, yourself — rather than performing, managing, or disappearing into hypervigilance. It draws on everything in this book, but particularly on

the somatic practices of Part Two, the self-knowledge developed in Part Four, and the recalibration work of Chapter 17.

The three enemies of presence on a first date

Before we look at what supports presence, it is worth naming the three things that most reliably undermine it in the specific context of post-toxic-relationship dating. Understanding them is the first step toward working with them.

Audition mode

Audition mode is the state in which you experience the date as a performance to be assessed rather than an encounter to be experienced. In audition mode, your primary concern is not what you genuinely notice about the other person but whether you are making a good enough impression. You monitor your words before you speak them, evaluate your responses after you give them, and spend more time managing your presentation than actually being present.

Audition mode is understandable — dating involves genuine evaluation and the possibility of rejection, and a nervous system that has been hurt before will naturally try to manage that risk. But it is also profoundly counterproductive, because the self that

appears in audition mode is not actually you. It is a curated, managed, performance version of you — and what you learn about the other person from within audition mode is similarly limited, because you are too busy monitoring yourself to genuinely observe them.

The antidote to audition mode is a shift in the question you bring to the encounter. From am I good enough for this person to who is this person and am I genuinely interested in them. That shift moves you from the position of person being assessed to the position of person doing the assessing — from the passive recipient of judgment to the active, curious, grounded presence that you actually are.

Future tripping

Future tripping is the tendency to project forward from the present encounter into imagined futures — whether anxious futures in which this person turns out to be unsafe, or hopeful futures in which they turn out to be the answer to the longing that has been building since the last relationship ended. Both forms remove you from the present moment and replace the actual person in front of you with a projection.

Anxious future tripping tends to produce the hypervigilant scanning described in Chapter 17 — the search for early warning signs that converts what might be a pleasant conversation into a risk assessment exercise. Hopeful future tripping tends to

produce the opposite error — the projection of qualities onto the other person that they may not actually possess, driven by the longing for connection rather than the patient observation of what is actually there.

Both are regulated by the same practice: returning to the present moment. To this person, this conversation, this specific exchange — what is actually happening right now, in this encounter, between these two people.

Comparison

The involuntary comparison of the new person to the previous one — either looking for the same qualities that made the previous person harmful, or looking for their absence as proof of safety. Both forms of comparison keep the previous relationship in the room, filtering the new experience through an old template rather than allowing it to be encountered freshly.

This is one of the most common and most limiting patterns in early post-toxic-relationship dating. It is also one of the most understandable — the previous relationship is the most recent data your nervous system has about what intimate relationships look and feel like, and it will naturally use it as a reference point. The work is not to pretend the comparison does

not happen but to notice it when it does, name it as a comparison rather than a perception, and return to the actual person in front of you.

Before the date — preparation that actually helps

The quality of your nervous system state when you arrive at a first date is significantly influenced by what you do in the hours before it. This is not about performing calm. It is about genuinely arriving in a state that is sufficiently regulated to allow presence.

Regulate before you leave

Use the practices from Chapter 6 in the hour before the date. The extended exhale breathing and the physiological sigh are both well-suited to pre-date preparation — they are quick, effective, and can be done anywhere. The safe place visualisation, used for five minutes before you leave, can bring you into a settled state from which genuine engagement is more available.

If you are significantly anxious, the cold water practice described in Chapter 6 — splashing cold water on the face, particularly around the eyes — produces a rapid parasympathetic response that can reduce acute anxiety quickly and effectively.

Set an intention that is about curiosity rather than outcome

Before you leave, spend a moment with a simple intention — not I hope this person likes me, not I hope this works out, but something closer to I am going to find out who this person is. My only job today is to be genuinely present and genuinely curious. That intention, held lightly, reorients the entire encounter away from performance and toward genuine engagement.

Remind yourself of who you are

This sounds simple and is genuinely important. Before a first date, spend a brief moment reconnecting with your values, with the things you know about yourself from the work of Chapter 10 and Chapter 13, with the person you are becoming. Not as a performance of confidence, but as a genuine return to yourself — so that you arrive as yourself rather than as an anxious, managing version of yourself.

During the date — practices for staying present

The check-in

At regular intervals during the date — you can do this in the space of a breath or a sip of your drink — do a brief internal check-in. Where am I in my window right now? Am I within it — curious, engaged, relatively at ease? Have I moved above it — anxious, monitoring, scanning? Have I moved below it — flat, disconnected, going through the motions?

Simply noticing where you are without judgment is itself regulating. And if you notice that you have moved outside your window, you have the tools — a slow breath, a moment of grounding, a gentle return of attention to the present moment — to bring yourself back.

Genuine curiosity as a regulation tool

Genuine curiosity — real interest in another person as a specific, particular human being rather than a potential partner to be evaluated — is itself a nervous system regulation strategy. When you are genuinely curious, your attention moves outward toward the other person rather than inward toward self-monitoring. The ventral vagal system — the system

associated with social engagement and genuine connection — activates. You become more present, more accessible, more yourself.

Practise asking questions you actually want to know the answers to. Not interview questions, not the scripted exchanges of early dating etiquette, but genuine questions arising from genuine interest. What actually drew them to the work they do? What has been the most significant thing they have learned in the last few years? What are they looking forward to? Real questions produce real answers, and real answers reveal real people — which is the only useful outcome of a first date.

Notice how you feel in their presence — not just what you think about them

Throughout the date, alongside the conversation, maintain a gentle awareness of your body. Not an anxious monitoring, but a soft attention. Are you becoming slightly more at ease as the date continues, or slightly less so? Is there a quality of ease in the conversation — a sense that you can be somewhat yourself without significant editing? Or is there a quality of effort — of managing, monitoring, calibrating?

This somatic attention is the compass of Chapter 13 in its most immediate application. The body is taking in far more information about this person than the

conscious mind is processing. Attending to it — not as the final word, but as one important source of data — is part of what it means to date with genuine self-knowledge.

After the date — the debrief that actually matters

The period immediately after a first date is one in which the thinking mind tends to race — replaying moments, analysing responses, reaching for conclusions about whether this person is right or wrong, safe or unsafe, worth seeing again or not. This analysis is not useless, but it is significantly less useful than it feels, and it tends to operate from within whatever nervous system state the date produced rather than from a regulated, grounded place.

Before you begin the analytical debrief, regulate first. Return home, use one of the practices from Chapter 6, and allow the activation of the date to settle. Then, from that more grounded place, sit with the following questions — in your journal if that is useful, or simply in quiet reflection.

The After-Date Reflection

Body first:

- How did you feel in their presence, overall — more at ease or less as the date progressed? What did your body notice that your thinking mind might have been busy explaining away?
- Did you feel more or less like yourself as the date continued? Were you editing, managing, performing? Or were there moments of genuine ease and naturalness?
- What happened in your nervous system? Were you within your window for most of it? Above or below? What triggered any shifts?

Observation second:

- What did you actually observe about this person — not what they told you about themselves, but what their behaviour, their attention, their responses revealed? Were their words and their manner consistent? Did they show genuine curiosity about you?

- Did you notice any of the early patterns described in Chapter 17 — love bombing, disguised criticism, difficulty with your autonomy, inconsistency between words and behaviour? Be honest and be specific.
- Did you notice any green flags — moments of genuine regard, real curiosity, warmth that settled rather than activated?

Honest assessment third:

- Not do I want them to like me — but do I genuinely like them? Am I actually interested in this person, or am I primarily relieved that they seemed interested in me?
- Would I like to find out more about who this person is? Not do I want a relationship with them — that is far too early to know — but is there enough genuine interest and enough felt safety to warrant another encounter?

This three-part debrief — body, observation, honest assessment — produces significantly more useful information than the usual post-date analysis, which tends to operate primarily from the level of thought and to be significantly

influenced by anxiety, wishful thinking, or the need for certainty that early dating cannot yet provide.

A note on realistic expectations

First dates, for most people, most of the time, are not revelatory. They are beginnings — small, provisional, often somewhat awkward beginnings in which two people are trying to find out enough about each other to decide whether a second conversation is worthwhile. They are not auditions for a relationship. They are not tests of your worth or your readiness. They are simply encounters — and like all encounters, their value lies primarily in what they reveal, not in what they produce.

Go gently. Go curiously. Go as yourself, as much as you are able. And remember that the goal of a first date is not to find the right person. It is to find out whether this particular person might be worth finding out more about. That is a much more manageable goal — and it is, genuinely, the only one that is available.

The best thing you can bring to a first date is not your most impressive version of yourself. It is your most genuine one. The person who is right for you will be interested in who you actually are — not the performance, not the

curated version, not the person you think you should be. Simply you, present, curious, and willing to find out. That is enough. That has always been enough.

A note on the material in this chapter: the practices described draw on the somatic and regulatory tools introduced in Part Two, particularly the work of Stephen Porges on the ventral vagal system and social engagement, and Daniel Siegel's window of tolerance framework. The three-part after-date reflection draws on principles from both mindfulness-based approaches and the EFT practice of attending to emotional and somatic experience as primary data. Full references are provided at the end of this book.

The Talk & Love™ *Back to Dating Hub* walks alongside everything in this chapter — with practices and reflections to help you stay regulated and present as you date.

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Chapter Nineteen

Pacing Vulnerability — Sharing Your Story Wisely

At some point in a developing connection — usually somewhere between the first few dates and the first real sense of genuine possibility — the question of your past will arise. Not necessarily as a direct question from the other person, though it may come that way too. More often it arises internally, as a quiet but insistent pressure: should I tell them what happened? How much should I say? When is the right time? What will they think of me when they know?

These questions are not trivial. They carry real stakes — the risk of being judged, the risk of the vulnerability being used against you, the risk of disclosing too much too soon and destabilising something fragile and new, the risk of disclosing too little and feeling, increasingly, that you are being known only partially. Getting the balance right — not perfectly, but well enough — is one of the genuine skills of post-toxic-relationship dating. And like all genuine skills, it can be learned.

This chapter offers a framework for thinking about disclosure — when, how much, to whom, and in what spirit — that is grounded in attachment theory, in the EFT understanding of vulnerability as the doorway to genuine intimacy, and in the practical wisdom of twenty years of sitting with people as they navigate exactly this question.

Why this is genuinely difficult

The difficulty of disclosing a previous toxic relationship is not simply the ordinary awkwardness of sharing personal history with someone new. It is shaped by several specific factors that are worth naming.

The first is the weaponisation history described in Chapter 14. If vulnerability was used against you in the previous relationship — if things you disclosed were later mocked, held as evidence of your inadequacy, or deployed in arguments — your nervous system has learned a specific and powerful lesson: sharing yourself is dangerous. The instinct to withhold is not irrational. It is the learned response of a person who discovered, empirically, that openness had costs.

The second is shame. Many people carry a degree of shame about having been in a toxic relationship — a residual sense that staying as long as they did, or loving as hard as they did, or not seeing what was happening until it was too late, reflects badly on their judgment or their worth. The prospect of disclosing the

relationship to a new person activates that shame — the fear of being seen as naive, damaged, or a poor judge of character.

The third is the complexity of the story itself. A toxic relationship is not a simple narrative. It contains love and harm, clarity and confusion, genuine connection and genuine destruction. Trying to convey that complexity accurately to someone who does not yet know you well is genuinely difficult — and the fear of being misunderstood, of having a complicated reality reduced to a simple verdict, can make disclosure feel almost impossible.

The attachment framework — vulnerability and trust develop together

In Emotionally Focused Therapy, Sue Johnson describes the development of genuine intimacy as a gradual, mutual process of increasing vulnerability — a cycle in which small acts of openness, met with responsiveness, produce enough safety for slightly larger acts of openness, which when met with responsiveness produce more safety still. Intimacy, in this framework, is not something that arrives fully formed. It is built, incrementally, through the accumulated experience of being seen and responded to with care.

This developmental framework has a direct implication for the question of disclosure timing: vulnerability and trust need to develop together. Disclosing deeply before trust has been established places the full weight of your most tender material on a foundation that has not yet been tested. It is not that the person is necessarily untrustworthy — it is that you do not yet have sufficient evidence of their trustworthiness to know whether your vulnerability will be held with care.

Conversely, withholding all vulnerability indefinitely — keeping the conversation at a permanently managed distance — prevents the trust from developing that would make deeper disclosure possible. It produces the experience of being known only at the surface, which is its own particular loneliness, and which tends to keep the connection in a pleasant but ultimately shallow register that never quite becomes the genuine intimacy you are working toward.

The goal is neither premature disclosure nor permanent withholding. It is pacing — the gradual, responsive, relationship-led movement toward increasing openness, at a speed that is determined by the actual development of trust rather than by anxiety, urgency, or obligation.

What pacing actually looks like in practice

Pacing vulnerability is not a formula and it cannot be reduced to a timeline — share this much by date three, that much by month two. Relationships develop at different speeds, people have different capacities for intimacy at different stages of their lives, and the appropriate pace is always determined by what is actually happening between two specific people rather than by any general rule.

What pacing looks like, in practice, is a graduated progression from the general to the specific, from the cognitive to the emotional, and from the resolved to the still-tender — moving deeper at each stage only when the response to the previous stage has been trustworthy.

Early conversations — general acknowledgement

In early dating, it is entirely appropriate to acknowledge, at a general level, that your previous relationship was difficult and that you have taken time to work through it. You do not owe anyone the details at this stage. You do not need to name it as abusive, explain the specific dynamics, or describe the impact it has had. A simple, settled acknowledgement — I came through a relationship that was pretty hard, and I spent quite a while making sure I understood it before

I started dating again — communicates what needs to be communicated at this stage without requiring vulnerability that the relationship has not yet earned.

Notice the quality of the response to this level of disclosure. Does the other person receive it with genuine interest and care? Do they ask thoughtful questions, or do they redirect quickly to themselves? Do they treat it with appropriate weight, or do they minimise it? Their response at this early, relatively low-stakes level is already information about how they are likely to respond when the stakes are higher.

Developing connection — more emotional honesty

As trust develops — as consistent responsiveness accumulates over multiple encounters — it becomes appropriate to share more of the emotional reality of the experience. Not the full story, not the most tender material, but the honest emotional texture of what the relationship was like and what its aftermath has asked of you.

This level of disclosure is not about producing sympathy or establishing the previous person's culpability. It is about allowing the new person to know something real about your experience — the ways the relationship shaped you, the work you have done to understand it, and perhaps something about what you

know now about what you need. This is the level at which your vulnerability begins to function as genuine intimacy rather than simply as history.

Deepening intimacy – the tender material

The most tender material — the specific ways the relationship damaged your sense of self, the core beliefs it activated, the fears it left behind — belongs to a stage of the relationship at which genuine, tested trust has been established. This is not a stage that all relationships reach. Some connections remain at a level of warmth and mutual interest that never quite becomes the depth of intimacy that would make this level of disclosure appropriate or necessary.

When genuine trust has been established — when you have evidence, accumulated over time and across multiple situations, that this person can hold your vulnerability with care, that they do not use what you share against you, that their interest in you is genuine rather than performed — then the deeper material can be shared, gradually and with attention to your own readiness, as an act of genuine intimacy rather than premature exposure.

How to share — the spirit of disclosure

As important as the timing and content of disclosure is the spirit in which it is offered. There is a significant difference between sharing your history from a place of genuine ownership — as someone who has worked to understand their experience and has arrived at a degree of clarity and equanimity about it — and sharing it from a place of unresolved activation, in which the disclosure functions primarily as an offloading of distress.

The first kind of sharing invites connection. It communicates: this is part of my story, I understand it well enough to speak about it calmly, and I am sharing it with you because I want you to know me. The second kind, however understandable, tends to overwhelm — it places the other person in the position of therapist or rescuer, which is neither fair to them nor useful for the connection you are trying to build.

This is not a requirement for perfect resolution before any disclosure is possible. It is an observation that the work of Parts Two and Three — the somatic settling, the cognitive clarity, the identity reclamation — directly shapes the quality and the impact of the disclosure you are able to make. The more genuinely your own story you have become, the more freely and safely you can share it.

When the other person also has a history

It is worth noting that most people dating in midlife or later carry their own significant relational histories — their own difficult relationships, their own wounds, their own patterns and scripts. A new connection is rarely a meeting between someone with a complicated past and someone without one. It is more often a meeting between two people who have both been shaped by what they have lived through.

This is not a complication. It is, in many ways, a gift. Two people who have both done genuine work on themselves — who both understand their patterns, know their needs, and have developed a degree of self-knowledge through the experience of difficulty — have the potential for a quality of depth and genuine mutuality that is simply not available to people who have not yet been asked to grow in these ways.

The key is reciprocity. Disclosure in a developing relationship should feel, over time, mutual — a gradual opening on both sides rather than one person doing all the disclosing and the other receiving. If you notice a persistent asymmetry — if you are consistently the one sharing while the other person remains defended and unrevealing — that asymmetry is itself information. Genuine intimacy requires both people to be willing to be known.

Vulnerability shared wisely is the beginning of real intimacy. Not the performance of openness, not the compulsive disclosure that offloads rather than connects, not the managed distance that keeps everyone safe and no one truly known — but the gradual, honest, responsive offering of yourself to someone who has shown, through their consistent behaviour over time, that they are genuinely worth trusting. That is how love is built. Carefully, incrementally, and with a quality of courage that looks, from the outside, very much like simply being yourself.

Chapter 20 opens Part Six — the final section of the book — with the question that all of this has been preparing you for: what does secure love actually feel like, and how do you recognise it when it arrives?

Reflection — Chapter Nineteen

In your journal, work through the following questions with honesty and care:

- What is your current relationship with disclosing your previous relationship to new people? Do you tend to over-disclose early — sharing more than the trust level warrants, driven by the need to be known or to test whether the person will stay? Or do you tend to withhold — keeping the conversation managed and surface-level, driven by the fear that genuine knowledge of your history will drive people away?
- How much of your hesitation about disclosure is rooted in unresolved shame — the sense that having been in this relationship reflects badly on your judgment or your worth? Sit with that honestly. What would it feel like to share your history from a place of genuine equanimity — not minimising what happened, but not being destabilised by it either?
- Imagine the conversation in which you share, at whatever level feels right, something honest about your previous

relationship with a new person who responds with genuine care and interest. What does that feel like in your body? What does their response tell you about the quality of the connection?

- Draft, in your journal, a brief, settled account of your previous relationship — the version you might offer in an early conversation with someone new. Not the full story. Not the worst of it. But an honest, clear, un-shamed acknowledgement of what happened and what you have done with it. Write it until it feels like yours — until you can read it back and feel, in your body, that it is the true account of a person who has genuinely understood their own experience.

That last exercise is not for the other person. It is for you. The more fluently you can hold your own story, the more freely and safely you can share it — and the more clearly you will be able to tell, from someone's response to it, whether they are someone worth trusting with more.

A note on the material in this chapter: the graduated vulnerability framework draws on Sue Johnson's EFT model of intimacy development, described in Hold Me Tight (2008) and Love Sense (2013). The concept of vulnerability as the pathway to genuine connection draws on Brené Brown's research, described in Daring Greatly (2012). The observation about reciprocal disclosure and genuine mutuality draws on attachment research into the development of adult intimacy. Full references are provided at the end of this book.

Vulnerability shared wisely is the beginning of real intimacy. The Talk & Love™ *Back to Dating Hub* supports you in taking that step with care.

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Chapter Twenty

What Secure Love Actually Feels Like

There is a conversation I have had, in various forms, with many people over twenty years of clinical practice. It usually happens somewhere in the middle of a period of genuine recovery — when the acute pain has settled, the self-understanding has deepened, and the person is beginning, carefully and with some trepidation, to imagine the possibility of a new relationship. They describe what they are hoping for. And then they say something that I have come to regard as one of the most important things a person can say in a therapy room:

But how will I know if it is the real thing?

It is a genuine question. It is also, I think, the wrong question — or at least an incomplete one. Because the question assumes that the real thing is something you recognise, something that announces itself with clarity and certainty. And the experience of most people who have been through a toxic relationship is that the thing that announced itself most clearly and most certainly last time was not the real thing at all.

The better question is not how will I recognise it. It is what will it actually feel like — in my body, in my nervous system, in the quality of my daily experience — to be in a relationship that is genuinely secure. And the answer to that question is both more specific and more surprising than most people expect.

The surprise of secure love

The most commonly reported experience of people who move from a toxic relationship into a genuinely secure one is not one of dramatic revelation. It is something considerably quieter, and considerably more disorienting at first, than they expected.

Safe love feels calm. It feels consistent. It feels, to a nervous system trained by a toxic relationship to associate love with urgency and uncertainty, almost anticlimactic. There is no constant monitoring of the other person's mood. There is no hypervigilant scanning for signs of impending withdrawal. There is no exhausting management of an unpredictable emotional environment. There is, instead, a quality of ease — a settled, reliable, unglamorous steadiness that takes some adjustment to recognise as the thing you have been working toward.

I have sat with people who, in the early stages of a genuinely healthy relationship, reported feeling flat, bored, or uncertain whether they were truly in love — because the absence of intensity felt like the absence

of connection. What they were experiencing was not the absence of connection. It was the presence of safety. And their nervous system, so thoroughly trained to experience love as high-stakes and unpredictable, did not yet know what to do with the quieter frequency of genuine security.

If you encounter this experience — if a new relationship feels somehow insufficient because it does not produce the urgent, consuming, can't-stop-thinking-about-it quality of the toxic one — please read this chapter carefully. Because what you may be experiencing is not the absence of the real thing. It may be its arrival.

What EFT tells us about secure bonding

In Emotionally Focused Therapy, Sue Johnson describes the experience of secure attachment between adult partners in terms that are worth sitting with. She describes it as a felt sense of having a safe haven — a person you can turn to when distressed and know that they will be there, accessible and responsive, not perfect but genuinely present. And a secure base — a person whose reliable existence in your life gives you the confidence to engage with the world, to take risks, to be fully yourself, knowing that there is someone who has you.

These are not dramatic experiences. They do not feel, in Johnson's description, like the fireworks of early infatuation or the urgent intensity of anxious attachment. They feel like ground beneath your feet. Like a hand available when you need it. Like the particular quality of ease that comes from knowing, in your body rather than just your mind, that someone is genuinely on your side.

Johnson describes three qualities that characterise secure attachment in adult relationships: accessibility — the person is available, not just physically but emotionally; responsiveness — when you reach toward them, they turn toward you; and engagement — they are genuinely interested in your wellbeing, not merely tolerating your presence. These are the qualities her research identifies as the foundation of lasting love — not chemistry, not compatibility in the superficial sense, but the consistent, lived experience of being genuinely met.

The felt qualities of secure love — a detailed map

Rather than speak about secure love in abstractions, I want to offer as specific and honest a description as I can of what it tends to feel like from the inside — particularly for people whose previous experience of love has been primarily of the insecure variety.

You can disagree without dread

In a secure relationship, disagreement does not carry the existential weight it carried in the toxic one. Conflict is possible — even healthy conflict, the kind that clears the air and leads to genuine understanding — without the background terror that it will tip over into contempt, withdrawal, or punishment. You can hold a different opinion. You can say this is not working for me. You can be difficult, in the ordinary human sense of having needs and preferences that occasionally clash with another person's, without the relationship threatening to collapse around you.

For people who spent years managing every interaction to avoid conflict, this experience of genuine safety within disagreement can itself feel strange at first. The absence of dread, when dread has been so long a companion, takes some getting used to.

You feel more yourself, not less

One of the most reliable indicators that a relationship is genuinely secure is that you feel more yourself within it over time — more able to express your actual opinions, more comfortable with your own feelings, more at ease with the full range of who you are — rather than progressively less. Secure love does not require you to make yourself smaller. It makes space

for you to be larger — more fully expressed, more genuinely known, more at ease with your own particularity.

If you notice, over the course of a developing relationship, that you are consistently editing, managing, performing — that the version of yourself you present to this person is significantly reduced from the version you are when you are alone or with people you fully trust — that is important information. Not necessarily a verdict. But information worth attending to.

Their absence does not feel like abandonment

In an anxious attachment dynamic, separation from the attachment figure — even brief, ordinary separation — tends to activate the attachment system. Their silence for a few hours produces anxiety. Their preoccupation with something else feels like withdrawal. Their independent existence, which any healthy person maintains, feels threatening rather than simply natural.

In a secure relationship, the other person's independence is experienced not as a threat but as simply the fact of them being a full human being with their own life. Their absence does not feel like abandonment. Their silence does not feel like withdrawal. You can hold the connection internally even when they are not present — carry the felt sense

of their care and availability with you in a way that does not require their constant physical or emotional proximity to maintain.

This capacity — to hold the connection securely in their absence — is one of the most distinctive felt experiences of secure attachment, and one of the most reliably different from the anxious experience that many survivors of toxic relationships are more familiar with.

Repair is possible and normal

Every relationship, however secure, contains ruptures — moments of misattunement, misunderstanding, hurt, or conflict. What distinguishes a secure relationship from an insecure one is not the absence of rupture but the presence of repair. In a secure relationship, ruptures are followed by genuine attempts at repair — acknowledgement of impact, honest communication about what happened, and a return to connection that leaves the relationship essentially intact and possibly stronger.

For people who experienced the toxic relationship's version of repair — the intermittent reinforcement cycle of rupture, remorse and honeymoon described in Chapter 1 — the experience of genuine repair can feel unfamiliar. It is quieter, less dramatic, less suffused with relief. It does not produce the neurochemical rush of the trauma-bonded cycle. But it produces something

far more valuable: the accumulated evidence that this relationship can survive difficulty, that conflict does not mean catastrophe, and that the connection between two people can hold the full weight of their imperfect humanity.

You are interested in them as a person, not consumed by them

There is a quality of genuine interest in a secure connection that is distinct from the consuming preoccupation of an anxious or trauma-bonded dynamic. You think about them with pleasure rather than anxiety. You are curious about their inner life, interested in their experience, genuinely delighted by the specific, particular person they are — rather than primarily preoccupied with what they think of you, what their last message meant, or whether the relationship is secure enough.

This quality of genuine interest — being interested in them rather than primarily anxious about them — is one of the most pleasant and most reliable markers of a secure connection. It produces a quality of aliveness in the relationship rather than exhaustion. It feels sustainable rather than consuming. It leaves room for both people to be fully present rather than perpetually managing the dynamic between them.

When your nervous system resists security

I want to return to something raised earlier in this chapter, because it is genuinely important and genuinely common: the experience of the nervous system resisting security precisely because security is unfamiliar.

If you have spent years in a dynamic in which love felt urgent, intense, and unpredictable, the nervous system has been calibrated to associate those qualities with attachment. When a genuinely secure connection arrives — consistent, available, undramatic — it may not activate the attachment system in the way you are used to. It may feel insufficient. It may feel boring. It may produce the unsettling sense that something is missing, that this cannot be the real thing because the real thing felt different.

If you encounter this, I want to suggest a practice: stay. Not indefinitely, not in the face of genuine incompatibility, but long enough to give your nervous system the chance to update. Long enough to find out whether what feels like insufficiency is actually the absence of toxicity. Long enough to discover whether the calm you are experiencing is emptiness or ground.

Many of the most genuinely satisfying relationships I have watched develop in my practice have had this quality at the beginning — a quietness that initially felt underwhelming, and that gradually, as the consistency

accumulated and the safety deepened, revealed itself as the most nourishing thing the person had ever experienced.

Safe love feels different. Calmer. More consistent. Less urgent. To a nervous system trained by a toxic relationship, it may feel, at first, like something is missing. What is missing is the anxiety. What is present — steady, available, unglamorous and entirely real — is the thing you have been working toward. Let it be what it is. Let yourself receive it. That is not a small thing. For many people, it is the bravest thing they ever do.

Part Five is complete. In Part Six — the final section of this book — we turn to the work of building and sustaining what you have found: the communication that deepens it, the self-awareness that protects it, and the ongoing practice of being the person you have become.

Reflection — Chapter Twenty

Take your time with this reflection. It asks for something that may feel unfamiliar — the patient, detailed imagining of something genuinely good.

- Has there been a relationship in your life — romantic or otherwise — in which you experienced something of what this chapter describes? A connection that felt genuinely safe, consistent, and nourishing? If so, what were its specific qualities? What did it feel like in your body to be in that connection?
- When you imagine a genuinely secure romantic relationship — not a perfect one, but a genuinely safe and mutual one — what specific qualities does it have? Be as detailed and as embodied as you can. Not what it looks like from the outside, but what it feels like from the inside.
- Sit honestly with the question of familiarity and intensity. Has there been a moment in your dating life, before or after the toxic relationship, when something felt genuinely safe but perhaps insufficient? Looking back at it now, with

what you know from this book, do you read it differently?

- What would it ask of you — specifically, practically — to stay with something that feels calm and consistent rather than urgent and consuming? What fears would that bring up? What would you need in order to give it the time it requires?

Keep your responses to the second question — the detailed imagining of what secure love feels like from the inside. This is your compass made specific. The more clearly you can feel what you are moving toward, the more reliably you will recognise it when it arrives.

*A note on the material in this chapter: the description of secure attachment in adult relationships draws primarily on Sue Johnson's EFT framework, particularly *Hold Me Tight* (2008) and *Love Sense* (2013). The ARE model — Accessible, Responsive, Engaged — is Johnson's. The description of how the nervous system responds to the unfamiliarity of security draws on Stephen Porges's Polyvagal Theory and on the clinical observations of trauma-informed therapists including Bessel van der Kolk and Peter Levine. Full references are provided at the end of this book.*

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Part Six — Author

Building Love That Feels Safe

Part Six covers Chapters 21, 22, 23 and 24. This final section is about the daily, lived work of building and sustaining a relationship that is genuinely secure — the communication that deepens it, the self-awareness that protects it, and the ongoing practice of remaining, in the fullest sense, yourself within it. The frameworks become less prominent here. The tone becomes quieter. This is where understanding becomes living.

Chapter Twenty-One

Hold Me Tight — Communicating in a New Relationship

Genuine intimacy between two people is not built primarily through shared experience, compatible interests, or even shared values — though all of these matter. It is built through conversation. Not the surface conversation of getting-to-know-you exchanges, and not the conflict conversation of two people defending their positions. It is built through a specific, rare, and learnable quality of emotional conversation — the kind in which two people are genuinely accessible to each other, genuinely responsive to what they hear, and genuinely willing to be moved by each other's experience.

This kind of conversation is what Sue Johnson, in her work on Emotionally Focused Therapy, calls a bonding conversation. It is the conversational equivalent of the secure attachment experience described in Chapter 20 — the moment when one

person reaches toward the other with something genuine and the other person turns toward it, takes it seriously, and responds from a place of real care.

For people who have come through a toxic relationship — in which emotional communication was consistently unsafe, in which genuine expression was met with contempt or punishment, in which the language of closeness was used as a tool of control — this kind of conversation can feel almost impossibly vulnerable. This chapter is about making it possible. Not easy — genuinely possible.

The pursue-withdraw cycle — understanding your pattern

Before we look at what healthy emotional communication looks like, it is worth spending a moment on the pattern that most reliably prevents it — because this pattern is almost universal in couples experiencing relational distress, and because understanding it is the first step toward changing it.

EFT research has consistently identified what Johnson calls the pursue-withdraw cycle as the most common pattern in troubled relationships. In this cycle, one partner — typically the more anxiously attached — responds to perceived distance or disconnection by pursuing: seeking reassurance, increasing emotional intensity, pressing for conversation, escalating in an

attempt to get a response. The other partner — typically the more avoidantly attached — responds to the same perceived threat by withdrawing: becoming quieter, more defended, more focused on practical matters, and less emotionally available.

The tragic irony of this cycle is that both people are doing the same thing: trying to manage the threat of disconnection. The pursuer pursues because connection feels urgently necessary and distance feels like abandonment. The withdrawer withdraws because emotional intensity feels overwhelming and closeness feels threatening. Both are trying to feel safe. And in trying to feel safe in their opposing ways, they produce the very disconnection they are each trying to avoid.

After a toxic relationship, you may recognise yourself primarily in one role or the other — or you may find that you occupy different roles in different relationships or at different stages of the same relationship. Understanding which role is most natural to you is important, because the communication practices that support genuine connection are different depending on where you tend to stand in the cycle.

The softened startup — how to raise difficult things

Research by John Gottman has consistently shown that the way a difficult conversation begins is the strongest predictor of how it will end. What he calls a harsh startup — beginning with criticism, blame, or contempt — almost invariably produces defensiveness and escalation. A softened startup — beginning with your own experience rather than the other person's behaviour — creates the conditions for genuine dialogue.

A softened startup uses what therapists sometimes call an I-statement: a communication that begins with your own felt experience rather than with an assessment of what the other person has done. Not you never make time for me but when we have not had time together recently I start to feel disconnected and uncertain about us. Not you always dismiss what I say but when I share something important and it does not seem to land I feel invisible and I pull back.

The difference is not merely stylistic. The I-statement opens rather than closes, because it does not put the other person on trial. It reveals rather than accuses. It makes space for the other person to respond to your experience rather than defend themselves against your verdict. And it is, for the person speaking, a genuine act of vulnerability — the

willingness to show what is actually happening inside rather than the safer, more defended option of leading with complaint.

For people who were punished for expressing their experience in the previous relationship, the softened startup requires deliberate courage. The habits of defended communication — the complaint, the attack, the pre-emptive distance — are deeply grooved, and they were formed for good reasons. Changing them requires not just the knowledge of what to do differently but the nervous system regulation to do it — which is why the practices of Part Two continue to matter long after the immediate post-relationship period.

The bonding conversation — reaching and responding

At the heart of EFT is what Johnson calls the Hold Me Tight conversation — a specific form of emotional dialogue in which partners take turns reaching toward each other with their deepest attachment needs and fears, and responding to what they hear with genuine accessibility and care. It is the conversation beneath the argument — the emotional reality that conflict, in most relationships, is actually about.

In a new relationship, bonding conversations do not need to be formal or structured. They arise naturally when two people are genuinely accessible to each other — when one person ventures something real and the other person turns toward it with genuine attention. What makes them possible is not technique but the qualities explored throughout this book: a regulated nervous system, a clear sense of self, the willingness to be vulnerable, and the capacity to receive another person's vulnerability without deflecting or minimising.

The three moves of a bonding conversation, in Johnson's framework, are reaching, responding, and holding. Reaching is the act of expressing a genuine emotional need or fear — moving past the defended surface to the attachment reality beneath. Responding is the act of receiving what the other person has reached with — turning toward it, taking it seriously, letting it matter. Holding is what the relationship does with that exchange over time — building, through accumulated moments of genuine reaching and genuine responding, the foundation of trust that makes deeper reaching possible.

Repair — the most important skill in any relationship

No relationship, however secure, is without rupture. Two people in genuine intimacy will inevitably hurt each other — through misattunement, through the collision of different needs, through the ordinary friction of two full human lives lived in proximity. What distinguishes a secure relationship from an insecure one is not the frequency of rupture but the quality of repair.

Genuine repair has three elements. The first is acknowledgement — a genuine recognition that something happened that caused hurt, without minimising, justifying, or immediately explaining. Not I am sorry you felt that way — which is not an apology but a deflection — but I can see that what I said landed badly and I am genuinely sorry for the impact it had.

The second element is understanding — a genuine attempt to comprehend the other person's experience rather than simply moving past the discomfort of the rupture as quickly as possible. What did that feel like for you? What did it bring up? This willingness to be curious about the impact of your behaviour — even when it is uncomfortable — is one of the most consistent markers of genuine relational capacity.

The third element is reconnection — the movement back toward each other after the acknowledgement and understanding have been offered. Not a performance of resolution but a genuine return to the felt sense of connection, however quiet and however gradual.

After a toxic relationship — in which repair was either absent, or present only in the form of the intermittent reinforcement cycle described in Chapter 1 — experiencing genuine repair can feel disorienting. It does not produce the relief and intensity of the trauma-bonded cycle. It produces something quieter and more durable: the evidence that this relationship can hold difficulty and continue. That the connection is not as fragile as you feared. That being in this relationship does not require the constant management of catastrophic risk.

Asking to be held is not weakness. It is the bravest thing. It says: I trust you enough to let you see that I need something, and I believe — on the basis of what I know about you so far — that you are capable of responding. Every time that trust is extended and honoured, the relationship grows. Every time a rupture is genuinely repaired, the foundation deepens. This is how love is built — not in the grand gestures, but in the

*thousand small moments of genuine reaching
and genuine response.*

Reflection and Practice — Chapter Twenty-One

Part One — Your cycle

In your journal, reflect on the pursue-withdraw cycle as it has appeared in your relational history:

- Do you tend to pursue — to move toward, increase intensity, press for connection — when you feel disconnected or uncertain? Or do you tend to withdraw — to become quieter, more defended, more focused on practical matters? Or do you move between roles depending on the relationship or the situation?
- What does the pursuing position feel like from the inside? What fear is it trying to manage? What does the withdrawing position feel like from the inside? What is it trying to protect?
- Can you see how your position in the cycle may have interacted with the dynamics of the toxic relationship — how it may have made the cycle run faster, or made it harder to leave?

Part Two — Softened startup practice

Think of something that has been difficult to say in a recent relationship — romantic, friendship, or family. Write the complaint version first: the way you would have expressed it from a defended, blame-oriented position. Then rewrite it as a softened startup: beginning with your own experience, using an I-statement, making space for the other person to respond rather than defend.

Notice the difference in what each version asks of you to say, and what each version is likely to produce in the person who hears it.

Part Three — A repair you owe

Is there a rupture in any of your current relationships — however small — that has not been genuinely repaired? Not necessarily from the toxic relationship, but in any relationship that matters to you now. Using the three elements described in this chapter — acknowledgement, understanding, reconnection — consider what genuine repair of that rupture might look like. You do not need to act on this immediately. Simply notice what it would require of you.

*A note on the material in this chapter: the EFT framework for bonding conversations and the pursue-withdraw cycle draws on Sue Johnson's *Hold Me Tight* (2008) and *The**

Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (2004). The softened startup and the research on conversation beginnings as predictors of outcomes draws on John Gottman's extensive research, summarised in The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work (1999). Full references are provided at the end of this book.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Catching Old Patterns Before They Take Hold

There is a particular quality of alarm that many people experience at some point in a new relationship — the moment when they notice, with a sinking recognition, something familiar. A response they did not choose. A dynamic they thought they had left behind. An old pattern running in a context they had hoped would be different.

This experience is not evidence that the work has failed. It is not evidence that you are incapable of change. It is evidence that patterns formed over years do not dissolve entirely through understanding alone — that they live in the body and the nervous system as well as the mind, and that they require more than insight to fully shift. What they require is exactly what this chapter offers: the ability to notice them early, understand what is driving them, and make a different choice before the pattern has run its full course.

Catching old patterns early is one of the most valuable skills you can develop in a new relationship. Not because the patterns are shameful — they are not,

they are simply human — but because the earlier they are noticed, the less momentum they carry, and the more room there is for genuine choice rather than automatic reaction.

Why patterns persist

We have explored throughout this book the multiple layers at which relational patterns operate — in the nervous system, in core beliefs, in life scripts, in attachment styles. At each of these levels, patterns are not merely habitual in the cognitive sense. They are wired — grooved into neural pathways through repetition, reinforced by the neurochemistry of familiar relational dynamics, and maintained by the particular kind of homeostatic pull that keeps all systems, biological and psychological, returning to what is known.

This is why the expectation that doing the work of recovery once should permanently eliminate old patterns is both understandable and unrealistic. The work of recovery changes the default — it shifts the baseline, widens the window of tolerance, revises the core belief, updates the script. But it does not erase the groove entirely. Under sufficient stress, under sufficient activation, under sufficient similarity to the conditions that originally produced the pattern, the old response will tend to reassert itself.

This is not failure. It is physiology. And knowing it in advance — knowing that the patterns will resurface, that this is normal and expected, and that noticing them is entirely different from being controlled by them — is one of the most protective pieces of self-knowledge you can carry into a new relationship.

The early warning signals — learning to read your own system

Every pattern has its early warning signals — the first, faint signs that the old dynamic is beginning to reassert itself, before it has gathered enough momentum to be difficult to interrupt. Learning to read these signals in yourself is the foundation of the early catching this chapter describes.

Early warning signals tend to be somatic before they are cognitive. They show up in the body before they show up as thoughts or behaviours. A tightening in the chest. A familiar quality of hypervigilance returning after a period of relative ease. A particular quality of self-monitoring that you recognise from the previous relationship. A subtle shifting of attention away from your own experience and toward the management of the other person's emotional state.

Some people notice that they begin to shrink — to edit themselves slightly, to become slightly less forthcoming, slightly more careful about what they

reveal. Others notice that they begin to pursue — to check their phone more frequently, to seek reassurance more persistently, to feel a quality of urgency about the connection that is disproportionate to what is actually happening. Others notice that they begin to perform — to present a more curated, more acceptable version of themselves rather than the genuine one that has been emerging through the work of Part Four.

None of these signals, noticed early, represent a crisis. They represent the pattern beginning to move — and that movement, caught early, can be redirected. The question is not whether the pattern will arise. It is whether you will notice it before it has run its course.

The three most common patterns to watch for

Returning to the rescuer role

For people whose primary position in the Drama Triangle was the Rescuer — whose sense of worth was bound up in being needed, who stayed in the previous relationship long past wisdom because leaving felt like abandonment — the rescuer pattern is one of the most likely to reassert itself in a new relationship.

It tends to arrive subtly. A new partner who is going through difficulty, and the natural, warm, human impulse to help. The help that gradually becomes over-functioning — taking on more than your share,

anticipating needs before they are expressed, organising your own life around managing someone else's. The growing sense that your value in the relationship is contingent on your usefulness. The familiar feeling of putting yourself last, consistently, in the name of love.

The early signal of this pattern is the point at which helping begins to feel like a requirement rather than a choice — when the prospect of not helping produces anxiety rather than simply care. That is the moment to pause, notice, and ask honestly: am I helping because I genuinely want to, or because my sense of being acceptable in this relationship depends on it?

Fawning and self-erasure

Fawning — the automatic appeasing response to perceived threat — is one of the four responses identified by the nervous system under conditions of danger, alongside fight, flight and freeze. For many survivors of toxic relationships, fawning became the primary survival strategy: the automatic subordination of one's own needs, opinions and feelings to the management of the other person's emotional state.

In a new relationship, fawning can reassert itself as an apparently innocuous tendency to agree, to accommodate, to prioritise the other person's preferences, to avoid expressing opinions that might cause friction. The individual moments seem

unremarkable. Cumulatively they reproduce the pattern of self-erasure that the toxic relationship required — not because the new person is demanding it, but because the nervous system, presented with the conditions of intimacy, returns to its learned survival response.

The early signal of fawning is the familiar feeling of agreeing to something you do not genuinely want, or withholding an opinion you genuinely hold, specifically to manage the anticipated response. When you notice this — even once — it is worth pausing and asking: what am I afraid will happen if I say what I actually think?

Catastrophising relational events

The hypervigilant nervous system trained by a toxic relationship is disposed toward catastrophic interpretations of ordinary relational events. A quiet evening becomes evidence of withdrawal. A delayed response becomes confirmation of abandonment. A moment of friction becomes the beginning of the end. The cognitive distortion of catastrophising, described in Chapter 11, runs on the fuel of a nervous system that has genuinely learned to expect the worst — because in the previous relationship, the worst was sometimes what arrived.

In a new relationship, catastrophising tends to produce the escalating pursuit of the anxious attachment position — the requests for reassurance that provide temporary relief but do not address the underlying activation, and that can place genuine strain on a connection that would otherwise be perfectly healthy.

The early signal of catastrophising is the quality of disproportionality — when your emotional response to a relational event feels significantly larger than the event itself warrants. That disproportionality is a signal: not that the relationship is in danger, but that the nervous system has been activated in a way that is drawing on old material rather than reading the present situation accurately.

What to do when you notice a pattern running

The moment of noticing is the moment of choice. It is the gap between stimulus and response that Viktor Frankl described as the space in which our humanity resides. And what you do in that gap matters enormously.

The first thing to do is regulate. Before you speak, before you act, before you reach for the phone — use one of the practices from Chapter 6 to bring your nervous system back within the window of tolerance.

Even a single physiological sigh, even thirty seconds of extended exhale breathing, changes the physiological state from which your next choice will be made.

The second thing to do is name it — to yourself, not necessarily to the other person. I notice I am in rescuer mode. I notice I am catastrophising. I notice I am beginning to fawn. The simple act of naming — which we explored in Chapter 7 in the context of emotional regulation — activates the prefrontal cortex and creates the crucial distance between you and the pattern. You are not the pattern. You are the person noticing the pattern. That distinction is everything.

The third thing to do is choose. Not the automatic response that the pattern prescribes, but a deliberate, grounded, values-led response that comes from the self you have been reclaiming throughout this book. What would the person I am becoming do here? What does my actual experience of this relationship — rather than my nervous system's activated reading of it — suggest is happening? What response, right now, is most consistent with who I genuinely am?

Talking to your partner about your patterns

One of the most powerful things available in a genuinely secure new relationship is the possibility of being honest about your patterns — of naming them to

your partner, not as a warning or a burden, but as part of the genuine self-knowledge that real intimacy makes possible.

This does not mean disclosing everything at once, or turning the relationship into a therapeutic project. It means that as trust develops, as the relationship deepens, it becomes possible to say something like: I notice that when I feel uncertain about us I have a tendency to seek reassurance in ways that are probably disproportionate to what is actually happening. If you notice that, it helps me to simply know that you are here. This kind of disclosure — specific, grounded, made from a place of genuine self-knowledge rather than self-pity — is itself an act of genuine intimacy. And a partner who can receive it, and work with it, is demonstrating exactly the relational capacity that your compass has been pointing toward.

Awareness of old patterns is how you outgrow them. Not the awareness of shame — the awareness of a person who knows themselves well enough to notice when the old story is trying to run, and who has developed enough agency to write a different one. You will not be perfect at this. Nobody is. The goal is not perfection. It is the gradual, honest, compassionate practice of catching yourself a little earlier each time — and choosing, from

*that caught place, the person you are
becoming rather than the person you were.*

Reflection — Chapter Twenty-Two

In your journal, work through the following with honesty and without self-judgment:

- Which of the three patterns described in this chapter — rescuing, fawning, catastrophising — feels most familiar? Can you trace its origin? Where did you first learn this response, and in what relational context did it develop?
- What are your personal early warning signals — the specific somatic or behavioural cues that tell you, before the pattern has fully run, that it is beginning to move? Write them down as specifically as you can. The more precisely you know your own signals, the earlier you can catch them.
- Think of a recent situation — in any relationship, not necessarily romantic — in which an old pattern ran. Can you identify the moment at which you could have intervened — the point at which you noticed something but proceeded anyway? What would regulate, name, choose have looked like at that moment?

- Is there a pattern you would be willing to name to a new partner — when the time and trust are right? What would you say? How would saying it, from a place of genuine self-knowledge, feel different from the shame-based experience of being found out?

Return to these questions periodically — not as a self-critical audit, but as a compassionate check-in. The practice of self-awareness in relationship is ongoing. It does not end when the book does.

*A note on the material in this chapter: the concept of fawning as a fourth trauma response alongside fight, flight and freeze was developed by therapist Pete Walker, described in *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving* (2013). The Drama Triangle patterns draw on Karpman's foundational work, described in Chapter 2. Viktor Frankl's observation about the space between stimulus and response is from *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946). The regulate, name, choose framework draws on principles from DBT (Dialectical Behaviour Therapy), developed by Marsha Linehan, and from the mindfulness-based approaches of Siegel and Williams. Full references are provided at the end of this book.*

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Your Ongoing Toolkit — Healing Is Not Linear

There is a particular kind of discouragement that arrives, sometimes, several months or even years into recovery — when something happens that sends you back to a place you thought you had left. A new relationship that reactivates old material. A date that goes badly and brings the core beliefs flooding back. A moment of recognising a pattern you were certain you had outgrown. A day when the grief about what happened feels as raw as it did at the beginning.

If you encounter this — and most people do, at least once — I want you to know before you arrive there that it is not what it looks like. It is not evidence that the healing has not happened. It is not evidence that you are back at the beginning. It is evidence that healing is not a linear journey from wounded to whole, and that the spiral nature of genuine recovery means that old territory is sometimes revisited — but revisited from a different altitude, with different resources, and with a capacity for navigation that did not exist the first time through.

This chapter is about the long game. About the practices, relationships, and habits of mind that sustain healing not just through the acute phase but across a lifetime. About what it means to treat your own recovery not as a project with a completion date but as an ongoing orientation toward growth, self-knowledge, and genuine connection.

The spiral nature of healing

Judith Herman, whose foundational work on trauma recovery has shaped the field for thirty years, describes recovery not as a straight line but as a spiral — a movement that returns repeatedly to the same themes and the same material, but each time from a slightly different vantage point, with slightly more capacity, and with a slightly different quality of understanding.

This is genuinely how it works. You will encounter your attachment patterns again — in new relationships, in friendships, in your relationship with yourself. You will encounter your core beliefs again — perhaps more quietly than before, but they will resurface. You will encounter the grief about what happened again — in waves, at unexpected moments, sometimes with a force that surprises you.

Each encounter is not a regression. It is the spiral returning to familiar territory from a new position. And what is different each time — if the work has been

done honestly — is the quality of your response. The time between activation and recovery shortens. The capacity for self-compassion deepens. The ability to hold difficulty without being entirely consumed by it develops. You do not become someone to whom hard things do not happen. You become someone who knows, increasingly, how to be with hard things when they do.

Therapy — the most reliable ongoing resource

I want to say directly, and without false modesty about the value of this book: the most powerful resource available for the ongoing work of recovery is a good therapeutic relationship. Not because books cannot produce genuine change — they can, and I hope this one has — but because the relational dimension of therapy provides something that no book can offer: the lived experience of being genuinely known by another person, and of having that knowledge held with care.

Therapy is not only for crisis. It is not only for the acute phase of recovery. Many of the most profound pieces of therapeutic work happen in the quieter middle periods — when the immediate pain has settled enough that genuine exploration becomes possible, when the patterns have become visible enough to be

worked with, when the person is strong enough to go to the more tender places without being overwhelmed by them.

If you are not currently in therapy and the material in this book has resonated with you, I would encourage you to consider it. Not indefinitely, not necessarily intensively, but enough to have the experience of working through this material in the presence of another regulated, attuned human being. That experience — of genuine co-regulation, of being met in your vulnerability and finding that it does not destroy the relationship — is itself a form of healing that reading about it cannot fully replicate.

When choosing a therapist, look for someone who works relationally — who understands attachment, who is comfortable with body-based work, and who brings genuine warmth as well as clinical competence to the work. The quality of the therapeutic relationship is the strongest predictor of outcome in therapy, across all modalities. Trust your instincts about the fit. The compass developed in Chapter 13 applies here too.

Journalling — the practice of ongoing self-knowledge

Journalling is one of the most consistently evidenced tools for emotional processing and self-knowledge. Research by James Pennebaker at the University of

Texas has shown that expressive writing — writing about difficult emotional experiences in detail and over time — produces measurable improvements in both psychological and physical health. The mechanism appears to involve the same affect labelling process described in Chapter 7: the act of putting experience into language activates the prefrontal cortex, creates distance from raw emotional experience, and supports the integration of difficult material into a coherent narrative.

You do not need to journal every day, or for long periods. Ten to fifteen minutes of genuine, uncensored writing several times a week — writing that engages honestly with what you are experiencing rather than performing wellness or positivity — is sufficient to produce the benefits Pennebaker's research describes. The reflection exercises throughout this book have been an introduction to this practice. Continuing them beyond the book, in whatever form feels most natural to you, is one of the most reliable ongoing investments in your own recovery you can make.

Community and genuine connection

We are, as Porges's Polyvagal Theory describes so precisely, a profoundly social species. Our nervous systems are designed to be regulated by other nervous systems. Our capacity for resilience is significantly shaped by the quality and depth of our social

connections. And our recovery from relational harm is, at its root, a relational process — one that happens not only in the privacy of our own internal work but in the accumulated experience of being safely and genuinely connected to other people.

The quality of your social world matters. Not its size — depth is far more important than breadth — but its quality. The people in your life who can be genuinely present with your experience, who can tolerate your difficulty without needing to fix it immediately, who co-regulate rather than dysregulate you, who know you well enough to notice when you have drifted from yourself — these people are not peripheral to your recovery. They are part of it.

If your social world was narrowed by the toxic relationship — as it often is, through the isolation that characterises coercive dynamics — rebuilding it is part of the recovery work. Slowly, deliberately, with the same self-knowledge and discernment you are bringing to romantic relationships. Friendship, community, and belonging are not supplements to healing. They are its medium.

Movement, body and the ongoing somatic practice

The somatic practices introduced in Chapter 6 are not a phase to move through. They are a way of living in the body — a daily or near-daily orientation toward the nervous system as something that benefits from conscious tending, not just in crisis but as a matter of ongoing maintenance.

The specific practices matter less than the consistency. Whether it is breath work, movement, yoga, swimming, walking in natural environments, or any other form of body-based practice that produces a sense of settling and presence — the practice of returning regularly to the body, of treating it as an ally rather than an inconvenient container for the mind, is one of the most reliable contributions to ongoing nervous system health.

Research on the neuroscience of exercise consistently shows that regular aerobic movement is one of the most powerful interventions available for anxiety, depression, and the neurological effects of trauma. It is not a replacement for therapy or for the relational work of recovery. It is a foundation — one that makes everything else more available.

Self-compassion as a practice

Kristin Neff's research on self-compassion identifies three components: self-kindness — treating yourself with the same warmth and care you would offer a close friend; common humanity — recognising that suffering and imperfection are part of the shared human experience rather than evidence of personal failure; and mindfulness — holding your experience with balanced awareness rather than over-identification or suppression.

Of all the ongoing practices available, self-compassion may be the most fundamental — because it shapes the quality of every other practice. The person who approaches their own healing with harshness and impatience will find the work exhausting and the setbacks devastating. The person who approaches it with genuine kindness — who can say to themselves, when the old pattern runs again, this is hard and I am human and I am doing the best I can — will find the same work sustainable, the same setbacks informative rather than catastrophic, and the same journey ultimately more nourishing than depleting.

Self-compassion is not self-indulgence. It is not the lowering of standards or the excusing of genuine harm. It is the recognition that you are a human being doing genuinely difficult work in genuinely difficult territory

— and that you deserve the same quality of care and patience that you would extend, without hesitation, to anyone else you loved.

Healing is not a destination. It is a way of moving through the world — with increasing self-knowledge, increasing compassion, and an increasing capacity to be genuinely present in your own life and in your relationships. A partner is not a finish line. A relationship is not the proof that the healing is complete. They are, at their best, companions in a journey that continues for as long as you are alive and growing. That is not a burden. It is the most human thing there is.

Reflection — Chapter Twenty-Three

This chapter's reflection is a practical one. In your journal, design your own ongoing toolkit — the specific practices, relationships and habits that will continue to support your healing beyond this book.

- **Therapy:** Are you currently in therapy? If so, how does the material in this book connect with the work you are doing there? If not, is this something you want to explore? What qualities would you look for in a therapist — for you, specifically, with your particular history and your particular needs?
- **Journalling:** Which of the reflection exercises in this book produced the most useful material for you? How could you continue that kind of reflective writing in an ongoing way? What format — free writing, prompted questions, a specific focus — feels most sustainable?
- **Body practice:** Which somatic practices from Chapter 6 have been most useful to you? What movement or physical practice do you already have, or could develop,

that supports your nervous system on an ongoing basis?

- **Community:** Who in your current life genuinely co-regulates you — whose presence settles rather than activates your nervous system? Are there people or communities you want to invest more in? Are there connections that have become depleting that you want to be more boundaried about?
- **Self-compassion:** What does your inner critic most frequently say to you in moments of difficulty or setback? Write a compassionate response to that criticism — the kind of response a genuinely kind and wise person would offer. Keep it somewhere you can return to.

Your toolkit is yours. There is no right version of it. The only criterion is that it actually supports you — that it is honest, sustainable, and genuinely nourishing rather than performed or obligatory.

*A note on the material in this chapter: Judith Herman's description of recovery as a spiral draws on *Trauma and Recovery* (1992). James Pennebaker's research on expressive writing is described in *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions* (1997). Kristin Neff's self-compassion framework is described in *Self-Compassion:**

The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself (2011). The neuroscience of exercise and its effects on anxiety and trauma recovery draws on John Ratey's Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain (2008). Full references are provided at the end of this book.

Healing is not a destination. It is a way of moving through the world. The Talk & Love™ *Back to Dating Hub* is part of that ongoing journey.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

A Letter to Your Future Self

We have covered a great deal of ground together. You have been willing to look honestly at what happened, at what it did to your body and your mind and your sense of who you are, and at what it asks of you to move forward with genuine agency rather than simply reaction. That willingness — to understand rather than only survive — is not nothing. It is, in fact, everything.

I want to close this book not with a summary or a list of key points, but with something more direct. A letter. Written from my desk, from twenty years of sitting with people exactly where you have been, and addressed to the version of you who is somewhere ahead — the one who has done more of this work, who has stepped more fully into the life that is possible from where you are standing now.

And then, at the end, I will ask you to write your own.

Dear You,

I am writing to you from a little way back in your story — from the place where you were still working through what happened, still learning to feel safe in your own

body, still finding the edges of who you are now that the relationship that shaped so much of your recent life is behind you.

I want to tell you some things I know about where you are going — not because I can see the future, but because I have watched enough people make this journey to know something about the territory that lies ahead.

The first thing I want to tell you is that you made it. Not through the absence of difficulty — there will have been more difficulty, more moments of doubt, more occasions when the old patterns surfaced and the old voices returned. But through it. Because you had what it takes, even when you could not feel it. Because the work you did — the honest, patient, unglamorous work of understanding yourself — was real, and real things have real effects, and the effects accumulate over time in ways that are not always visible until they suddenly are.

The second thing I want to tell you is that the love you found — or are finding, or will find — is probably not what you expected. It is quieter than you imagined. More ordinary in the best possible sense. Less urgent, less consuming, less like the stories that told you love should feel like barely being able to breathe. It feels, instead, like ground. Like someone who is genuinely interested in the particular person you are. Like the particular relief of not having to manage anything, not

having to monitor anything, not having to be less than you are in order to be acceptable. It feels like being known — actually known, not just wanted — and finding that being known is not as frightening as you once believed it would be.

I want to tell you about something else too. About the moment — and there will have been a moment, or several — when you realised that you were genuinely at ease in your own company. When solitude stopped feeling like abandonment and started feeling like a choice. When you understood, not as a consolation but as a genuine truth, that the relationship you have with yourself is the foundation of every other relationship you will ever have — and that you have been building something real on that foundation, quietly and consistently, over the time since you read these pages.

I want to acknowledge something that does not get acknowledged often enough: how much courage this took. Not the dramatic, visible kind of courage — though there was that too. The quiet, daily kind. The courage to feel what you felt instead of suppressing it. The courage to ask for what you needed when every instinct said that asking was dangerous. The courage to hold a boundary when the guilt rose up and told you that having limits made you unkind. The courage to stay with something that felt calm and consistent when

the part of you trained by chaos kept insisting that something must be missing. That is not a small courage. It is the most human kind there is.

I want to say something about the relationship you came through — the one that brought you to this book. I know that it is probably complicated, even now, in the way that significant things always are. I know there may still be moments of grief about it — not for the harm, but for what you hoped it would be, for the version of the story in which it turned out differently. That grief is allowed. It does not contradict the healing. It is part of it. You can know that a relationship was harmful and still mourn what it was not. Both things are true. Both deserve space.

What I hope — what I genuinely, clinically, humanly hope — is that you have been able to hold that relationship as a part of your story rather than the whole of it. That you have been able to say, with increasing ease: this happened, it shaped me, I understand it, and it is not the last word about who I am or what I am capable of. That the word survivor has given way, gradually and without fanfare, to something more spacious. Author, perhaps. Or simply: myself.

I want to say one more thing, and then I will let you go. The sensitivity that you were told was a problem — the depth, the capacity for feeling, the attunement to the emotional reality of the people around you — I hope you have found, by now, that it is one of the most

extraordinary things about you. Not because it makes life easier. It does not, and it never will. But because it makes you capable of a quality of connection, of genuine presence in relationship, of real and lasting intimacy, that is simply not available to people who have not learned to live at that depth. The relationship that tried to use it against you did not diminish it. It revealed it. And the right person — the person whose capacity genuinely meets yours — will not be threatened by it. They will be grateful for it. As they should be.

You have done something remarkable. You took something that could have made you smaller — that was designed, in its way, to make you smaller — and you used it to become more fully yourself instead. That is not a small thing. In the whole of human experience, I am not sure there is a larger one.

With genuine admiration and genuine care,
James

Your Letter to Your Future Self

Now it is your turn.

In your journal — or on paper, if that feels more fitting — write a letter to the version of yourself who is one year ahead, or two years, or five. Write to the person you are becoming. Not the perfect version, not the fully healed version, but the genuinely further-along version — the one who has continued to do this work, to live this way, to choose with the self-knowledge you have been building.

Write what you want that person to know. What you hope they have found. What you want them to remember about where they started and how far they have come. What you want to say to them about the courage it took and the love they deserve.

Write it as honestly as you can. Write it with as much warmth toward yourself as you can manage. And when you have finished, seal it — metaphorically or literally — and return to it in a year.

What you will find, when you read it then, is that the distance between where you were and where you are is larger than it felt from the inside. That

the work you did was more significant than it seemed while you were doing it. That the person you were writing to — with such careful hope — is, in the ways that matter most, genuinely you.

*This is the last chapter of *After the Toxic Relationship*. The *References and Resources* section follows, with full citations for all the clinical frameworks, research and thinkers drawn on throughout this book, and guidance on finding further support. The *Talk & Love™ Back to Dating Hub* — the living companion to this book — is at talkandlove.com/back-to-dating-hub.*

You have done the work. Now let it live. The *Talk & Love™ Back to Dating Hub* is there whenever you want to take the next step.

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If You Would Like Support

Reading about the work of healing is one thing. Doing it — in a safe, supported, genuinely held space — is another. If anything in this book has stirred something you would like to explore more deeply, you do not have to do it alone.

The Talk & Love™ Back to Dating Hub is the living companion to this book — a guided space built around everything you have been reading, with practical tools, reflections and support for each stage of the journey from healing to genuine connection.

Whatever stage you are at — still healing, beginning to consider dating, or building something new — the Talk & Love™ Back to Dating Hub is there for you.

→ talkandlove.com/back-to-dating-hub

If you would like to work personally with James — in individual counselling or coaching, online or in person — you are welcome to reach out directly. There is no obligation and no pressure. Simply a conversation about whether working together might be the right next step for you.

To find out more about working with James, or to get in touch directly:

→ talkandlove.com/back-to-dating-hub

✉ info@talkandlove.com

You do not have to do this alone. And you do not have to have it all figured out before you ask for help. Reaching out is itself the first act of choosing something different.

James Seal — integrative counsellor, coach and founder of Talk & Love™

BACP Registered Member

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References and Resources

The following references are organised by the therapeutic framework or theme they primarily relate to, reflecting the structure of the book. Where a work spans multiple areas it is listed under its primary contribution. All works are cited in full academic format.

A note on attribution: the clinical frameworks in this book — Emotionally Focused Therapy, Polyvagal Theory, Transactional Analysis, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Attachment Theory and Somatic Experiencing — belong to their originators. The integration of these frameworks, their application to toxic relationship recovery, and any errors of interpretation are entirely my own.

Attachment Theory

Ainsworth, M.D.S., Blehar, M.C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and Loss, Vol. 1: Attachment*. Basic Books.

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Polyvagal Theory and the Nervous System

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Window of Tolerance and Interpersonal Neurobiology

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Trauma and the Body

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- Berne, E. (1964). *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*. Grove Press.
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Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

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Mindfulness-Based Approaches

- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*. Hyperion.
- Segal, Z.V., Williams, J.M.G., & Teasdale, J.D. (2002). *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression*. Guilford Press.
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Self-Compassion and Vulnerability

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Neff, K. (2011). *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*. William Morrow.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Values

Harris, R. (2008). *The Happiness Trap: How to Stop Struggling and Start Living*. Exisle Publishing.

Hayes, S.C., Strosahl, K.D., & Wilson, K.G. (2012). *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: The Process and Practice of Mindful Change* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

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Aron, E.N. (1996). *The Highly Sensitive Person: How to Thrive When the World Overwhelms You*. Broadway Books.

Coercive Control and Toxic Relationship Dynamics

Bancroft, L. (2002). *Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men*. Berkley Books.

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Loneliness and Social Connection

Cacioppo, J.T., & Patrick, W. (2008). *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*. W.W. Norton & Company.

Expressive Writing and Emotional Processing

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Goulding, R., & Goulding, M. (1979). *Changing Lives Through Redecision Therapy*. Brunner/Mazel.

Affect Regulation and Development

Schore, A.N. (1994). *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self: The Neurobiology of Emotional Development*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Further Reading — Recommended for Readers

The following titles are recommended for readers who wish to explore specific themes from this book in greater depth.

Aron, E.N. (1996). *The Highly Sensitive Person*. Broadway Books. — For readers who identified strongly with the sensitivity material in Chapter 13.

- Bancroft, L. (2002). *Why Does He Do That?* Berkley Books. — For readers who experienced significant control or abuse and want a more detailed clinical account of those dynamics.
- Brown, B. (2012). *Daring Greatly*. Gotham Books. — For readers who want to go deeper into the vulnerability and shame material.
- Fennell, M. (1999). *Overcoming Low Self-Esteem*. Robinson. — A practical, CBT-based workbook for the core beliefs work in Chapters 8 and 11.
- Herman, J.L. (1992). *Trauma and Recovery*. Basic Books. — For readers who want a deeper understanding of the trauma framework underlying much of this book.
- Johnson, S.M. (2008). *Hold Me Tight*. Little, Brown and Company. — For readers who want to go deeper into the EFT framework and the science of secure bonding.
- Neff, K. (2011). *Self-Compassion*. William Morrow. — For readers who found the self-compassion material in Chapter 11 and Chapter 23 particularly resonant.
- van der Kolk, B.A. (2014). *The Body Keeps the Score*. Viking Press. — For readers who want a deeper understanding of how trauma is held in the body and what somatic healing involves.
- Walker, P. (2013). *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving*. Azure Coyote Publishing. — For readers who recognise significant complex trauma in their history and want a compassionate, practical guide to working with it.
-

Finding Professional Support

If you would like to work with a qualified therapist or counsellor, the following organisations can help you find registered practitioners in the UK:

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP): www.bacp.co.uk

UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP): www.psychotherapy.org.uk

International Centre for Excellence in Emotionally Focused Therapy (ICEEFT): iceeft.com — for EFT-trained therapists internationally.

Talk & Love™ — James Seal, integrative counsellor and coach: talkandlove.com/back-to-dating-hub

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About the Author — Short Bio

James Seal is an integrative counsellor, coach and the founder of Talk & Love™ — a practice dedicated to helping people heal after heartbreak, rebuild confidence in dating, and build lasting emotional intimacy.

With over twenty years of experience and a foundation in biology from the University of Exeter, James brings both scientific rigour and deep human warmth to his work. His training spans integrative counselling, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, NLP, and hypnotherapy — giving him an unusually wide lens through which to understand the mind, body and heart.

James is a registered member of the BACP and works with individuals and couples across the UK.

talkandlove.com

About the Author — Full Bio

James Seal is an integrative counsellor, coach and the founder of Talk & Love™ — a practice built on a single, deeply held belief: that we can only heal and relate fully when we learn to feel safe in our own bodies and emotions.

With over twenty years of experience supporting people through change, loss and growth, James specialises in helping individuals heal after heartbreak, rebuild confidence in dating, and deepen emotional intimacy in their relationships. His work sits at the intersection of science and compassion — drawing on the nervous system, attachment theory, and the quiet, persistent courage it takes to open your heart again.

A foundation in science and human connection

James's journey into this work began with biology. His BSc from the University of Exeter gave him a lasting respect for the human nervous system and the way our emotional and physical worlds are inseparable — a conviction that runs through every page of this book.

His early career led him into Neuro-Linguistic Programming, where he trained to practitioner, master practitioner and trainer level with John Seymour Associates — one of the most respected NLP training organisations in the UK. This work introduced him to the profound relationship between language, perception and emotional experience.

Over time, his curiosity about the deeper layers of human change drew him into counselling. He completed his Diploma in Integrative Counselling at Iron Mill Training College, Exeter, followed by a Postgraduate Diploma in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy at the University of Exeter. He also holds a qualification in Hypnotherapy from the California Bureau for Private Postsecondary and Vocational Education.

Why this work

Working with clients navigating heartbreak, loss and the tentative steps back toward connection, James noticed a thread that ran through almost every story: the wound was not just emotional. It lived in the body. In the nervous system. In the way people had learned — quite reasonably — to keep themselves safe by staying closed.

Talk & Love™ grew out of that understanding. It is not simply about talking through experience, but learning to be with it — to bring presence, compassion and curiosity to the places that have felt stuck or guarded for years.

How James works

James offers a calm, collaborative and non-judgemental space where clients can slow down, reconnect with themselves, and begin to understand the deeper patterns that shape how they feel and relate. His integrative approach combines the reflective depth of counselling with the practical tools of coaching, the embodied awareness of mindfulness, and nervous system literacy.

He works with individuals and couples across the UK and is a registered member of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), practising in accordance with their ethical framework.

Find out more at talkandlove.com

Professional Qualifications

- BSc in Biology — University of Exeter (2000)
- Practitioner, Master Practitioner and Trainer of NLP — John Seymour Associates (2003–2006)
- Certified Hypnotherapist — California Bureau for Private Postsecondary and Vocational Education (2005)
- Diploma in Integrative Counselling — Iron Mill Training College, Exeter (2015)
- Postgraduate Diploma in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy — University of Exeter (2015)
- Registered Member of the BACP — practising in accordance with their ethical framework