

Introduction

A great many tasks are obviously so tricky (landing a plane, overseeing a court case, extracting a tooth) that we have no qualms about accepting that we will have to train for a long time before we give them a go. However, significantly, we haven't yet added love to this list of ambitions that we would ideally need to train for. We've inherited a Romantic perspective that suggests that living successfully with another person – maybe for decades – only depends on two relatively straightforward details: finding 'the right person' and experiencing a high degree of mutual passion from the first.

Unfortunately, the results of this attitude have been disastrous. The great majority of relationships end in heartache within two to three years, while those that survive longer – and may lead to marriage – normally involve a sizeable amount of quiet suffering. Being deeply unhappy but undivorced is possibly the dominant state of most couples' existence. After a heady and passion-filled start, many of us end up in unions that are a confusing tangle of hope, distance, boredom, irritation, loyalty and betrayal. The added irony is that we tend to think that we're alone with our problems.

It's not strange that all of this should happen. Almost no one ever finds a person with whom they miraculously and intuitively connect across all areas. However compelling someone may appear to be at the outset, time almost inevitably reveals them as a bit maddening in multiple ways. Of course there are exceptional couples, but they are awe-inspiringly rare and generate a tragically misleading idea of what's likely to happen in our own case. We would be better off assuming from the outset that a relatively pronounced degree of pain and discord is going to be our lot.

We should graciously understand that being together in the long term is a fiendishly difficult project that requires us to submit to education. We're going to have to go back to school. Yet we should also maintain a faith that even if a relationship is currently very difficult, it's almost always open to being changed and improved in at least a few important areas – so long as we practise. Not every relationship can become ideal. But it is fair to suppose that the vast majority of them can end up being good enough: that

is, relationships where, alongside a degree of friction and awkwardness, life can be broadly constructive, occasionally tender and sometimes delightful.

This workbook brings together a wide range of exercises that can help a couple to build mature communication, that foster understanding and that nurture patience, forgiveness, humour and resilience in the face of the many frustrations that attend any attempt to live with someone else. The notion of exercising is well understood in many areas – water skiing or French verbs, for example – and we should grant that it applies equally well to relationships. No one is intuitively good at love. We all need to do a little homework.

Through this book, we confront an odd but crucial thought: that love is a skill, not an emotion – and that we owe it to ourselves and our loved ones to undergo a few playful, intriguing and consoling exercises that can improve our capacity to be a good enough partner.

Instructions on how to fill in this book

Throughout these pages, you will find sections in two different colours:



Choose a colour to use throughout, while your partner uses the other.

Take time to fill in as many of the exercises as feels comfortable.

The Pledge

The surest indicator of the success of a relationship is not whether or not there are arguments, moments of fury, stretches of loneliness or incidents of betrayal; it is – quite simply – whether or not two people want to be together.

If they do, and if they firmly know this of themselves and of the other, then pretty much every obstacle can be overcome. The fractious current state of a relationship is never enough to doom it. Saying in the heat of an argument that one hates one's partner and wishes to divorce them tomorrow morning (or worse) means nothing whatsoever. All that matters is the underlying concrete intention that one carries in one's heart and which – surprisingly – people often don't share either with their partner or with themselves ... until it's too late.

Therefore, as a prelude to consulting any of the specific exercises in this book, we want you to consider whether or not you can sign up to a declaration. We are interested in intentions, not (yet) in action.

If you can sign up to these words, however many squabbles you may have had, however hard intimacy might be, however many bad words may have been said in fury, then half the battle at least has already been won:

.....
I still love you and want to be with you.

.....
We are both responsible for the pains we have gone through.

.....
Neither of us is perfect. We both bring deep-seated problems and faults to our relationship – many dating back to our childhoods. These are extremely hard to notice, change and account for. We will do our best, but if we can't manage certain steps, we would at least like to confess that – like everyone else on the planet – we are a little mad, and we're deeply sorry for this. It's the way we're all built. We know we've brought trouble into one another's lives. Once more, sorry.

.....
We want things to go better between us because we profoundly care about one another, despite everything. We admire each other still.

.....
For things to go better, we will both need to be modest and newly humble. We will need to let go of some very entrenched positions. We will, the two of us, have to give up on the pleasures of feeling in the right.

.....
The work we'll do together won't be fast – and it will at points be rather painful. But we're committed to being curious about one another, to acknowledging errors – and to hearing uncomfortable truths. We'll try not to get cross – and when we do a bit nevertheless, we'll try to figure it out and go easy on one another.

.....
We will never be perfect.

.....
We want love to work for us. That it hasn't been too simple so far is no indication of anything other than that what we're trying to do is very hard indeed. We do truly love each other, at least sometimes. We want this to work.

.....
Signed:

.....
Signed:

.....



1. The Scale of the Ambition

Part of the reason why relationships can often seem disappointing is that all of us probably have, somewhere in our unconscious, a memory of love having once been very much easier. Think of a newborn baby just after a feed. All its needs have, for now, been taken care of. A primordial bliss descends. It feels united with its parent, satiated, safe and utterly at peace.

Our idea of what a good, loving relationship should be like (and what it feels like to be loved) doesn't – it seems – ever just come from what we've experienced in adulthood; it arises from a stranger, more powerful source. The idea of happy coupledom taps into a fundamental picture of comfort, deep security, wordless communication and of our needs being effortlessly understood that comes from early childhood.

At the best moments of childhood (if things went reasonably well), a loving parent offered us extraordinary satisfaction. They knew when we were hungry or tired, even though we couldn't explain. We did not need to strive. They made us feel completely safe. We were held peacefully. We were entertained and indulged. And even if we don't recall the explicit details, the experience of being cherished has made a profound impression on us; it has planted itself in our deep minds as the ideal template of what love should be.

As adults, without really noticing, we continue to be in thrall to this notion of being loved, projecting the best experience of our early years into our present relationships and finding them sorely wanting as a result – a comparison that is profoundly corrosive and unfair.

So part of what we need to work on is our expectations. The love we received from a parent when we were a baby can't ever be a sound model for our later, adult experience of love. The reason is fundamental: We were relatively simple and tiny then, we are an adult now – a dichotomy with several key ramifications.

For a start, our needs were so much easier to fulfil. As babies, we needed to be washed, amused, put to bed. But we didn't need someone to trawl intelligently through the troubled corners of our minds. We didn't need a caregiver to understand why we prefer the first series of a television show to