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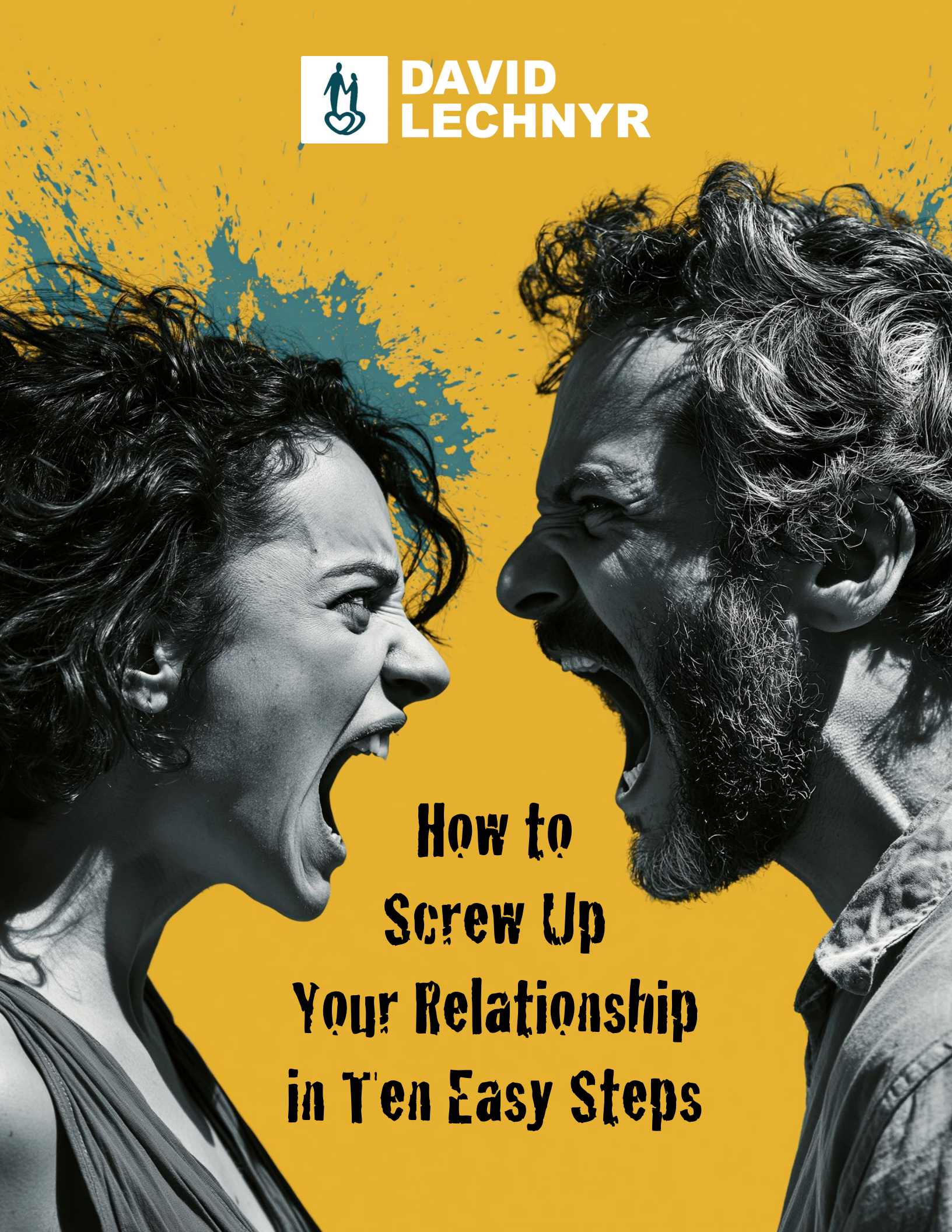

How to Screw Up Your Relationship in Ten Easy Steps

A Warning Before We Begin...

Most relationship books promise transformation if you just learn the right technique. This isn't that kind of book.

What follows is a field guide to the ten most common ways couples erode their relationships, often without realizing it. By reverse-engineering these patterns, you can easily do the George Costanza method: Just do the opposite.

Each chapter names a specific pattern, explains the mechanism driving it, and gives you one concrete move to start changing it. The content is grounded in decades of relationship research, the same research that forms the foundation of the most empirically validated approach to couples therapy in existence.

It's also bite-sized and designed to be easy to use. In other words, you don't need to read this cover to cover. You can start with the pattern that's costing you the most right now.

But before you get started, read the next section at least. Otherwise, you'll likely misread your own progress.

Why This Will Feel Like It Isn't Working... (Before It Does)

Here's what's going to happen when you try the approaches in this book.

You'll attempt something new. A new approach or communication tool. And your partner might look at you like you've started speaking a foreign language. When that happens, your brain will say: *This is stupid. This will never work.* That story feels true. It isn't. What's actually happening is more mechanical than that.

Your partner has been tracking patterns in your relationship for months or years. They have learned, through repeated experience, what to expect from you during conflict, during attempts to connect, during attempts at closeness. When you suddenly behave differently, their brain doesn't register "improvement." It registers "anomaly." And the nervous system's job is to treat anomalies as potential threats until proven otherwise.

Partners typically need somewhere between 30–50 consistent exposures to a new behavior before they stop interpreting it as suspicious and start incorporating it as the new baseline. That's not a discouraging statistic. It's a calibration tool. It tells you that your early attempts aren't failing. They're accumulating.

This is also why waiting for your partner to go first is a losing strategy. If both of you are waiting for the other to change first, nobody wins. The research on this is clear: In most cases, one partner's consistent unilateral shift in behavior is sufficient to begin altering the patterns of the relationship as a whole. You don't need mutual buy-in to start. You do need sustained effort long enough for your partner to start trusting you.

That said, unilateral effort has limits. If you work through this material consistently for four to six weeks and the patterns remain completely unchanged, that's important information worth taking seriously. Some couples are contending with levels of accumulated hurt or ongoing topics of conflict that require professional support to move. The good news is that a skilled therapist isn't a sign that you failed. It's just a more powerful tool for a harder job.

But you're not there yet. Start here. Give it a real run before you draw conclusions. One pattern at a time. Someone has to go first. That's you.

Step 1:
Guarantee That Your Conversations Will Ignite...

Most couples assume that what destroys a conversation is what happens in the middle of it. The defensiveness, the raised voices, the things said that can't be unsaid. Research says otherwise. The outcome of a difficult conversation is largely determined during the first 90 seconds. Basically, it's a countdown for how flammable or likely the conversation is to explode.

In fact, here's something truly remarkable and terrifying. How you both handle a conversation during those first 90 seconds can predict, with 96% accuracy, how your conversation will end. The first three minutes. And right now, you're possibly failing that test every single time.

People often often mistake this advice as being about the opening move during a conversation. How things are brought up. The tone, the word choice, the framing. These are what relationship researchers call "the startup". And while this matters (and greatly), what is said during those first 90 seconds from *either* partner can potentially make your conversation more combustable.

Let's examine the startup. When you lead with "You never" or "You always" or "What's wrong with you," **you've already lost.** Your partner doesn't hear a legitimate complaint. Instead, they hear a character assassination. And guess what? They're going to defend themselves or counterattack, because that's what humans do.

What about the response? Imagine that you've brought up a conversation so gently, that there's no way it could be misinterpreted. The way you'd talk to your dearest friend. And your partner reacts defensively anyways. Here's the hard truth: Those first few minutes are so precarious that if either side contributes to setting it on fire, then that's what is likely to happen.

So what's the real difference between couples who survive these first few minutes and those who don't? It's not about whether they have problems. Everybody's got problems. **It's about how they bring up and initially respond to those problems.** The couples that do well don't come in swinging. They come in vulnerable. They say "I feel overwhelmed when the kitchen's a mess" instead of "You're such a slob." They say "I'm worried about our budget" instead of "You're terrible with money." Same issue, completely different delivery.

Partners on the receiving end have an important job to do too, especially during those first few precious moments: Keep it gentle, too. “Ok, there’s a part of me that wants to react and scream, but I’m not going to because you’re important to me and I’m trying to do better”. Or, “So what I hear you saying is that you’re angry about the dirty dishes, did I get that right?”

Now, I know what some of you are thinking: “But I shouldn’t have to sugarcoat everything. I’m just being honest.” **There is a difference between honesty and cruelty.** You know how to be polite to strangers, to your boss, to the person making your coffee. But somehow with the person you claim to love most in this world, you think you’re entitled to just vomit out whatever you’re feeling without any filter? Or react to your partner’s words with defensiveness and anger? That’s not authentic.

True, these techniques matter during the entire conversation, not just the first 90 seconds. However those first few minutes are extremely flammable, and how you both handle it dramatically creates an outcome that you either appreciate or feel held hostage by.

And that pattern is destroying your relationship, 90 seconds each time.

Your Next Move

Pick the one issue that comes up most in your relationship. Write down exactly how you usually start that conversation. Now rewrite it using this formula: "I feel [emotion] about [specific situation]. I need [ask for what you want, not what you don't want]." If you're serious about changing your relationship, you'll practice this new opening until it becomes second nature.

Then, imagine reacting to something your partner says, even if they say it nicely. Use this formula: [take a deep breath] [wait 2-3 heartbeats] "Ok, so what I hear you saying is [...], did I get that right?" Or, "I know that the first 90 seconds are always tense, so let me try to gather my thoughts for a moment, because you matter to me. Ok, here it is: [...]"

Step 2:

Solve Problems Before You Understand What's Really Going On...

Almost 70% of all relationship conflicts will never go away. Ever.

That means, that technically, you're never going to solve them either. Not in a year. Not in ten years. Not ever. They're baked into who you are as two different human beings.

Say that your partner is messy and you're a neat freak. Or you're always early and your partner can't ever show up on time if you glued a watch to them. Then there's the favorite: Your partner loves their uncle Willie (but you hate Uncle Willie).

I've got bad news: Uncle Willie isn't going anywhere. That's the 70%.

Here's the more horrifying truth. If you say, "Screw you and your 70%, I'm out of here," you'll probably be happy for a bit. You might even find someone who fits you better. And once the honeymoon period wears off, bang! You have someone with a **different** set of 70% of unsolvable conflict.

If that sounds discouraging, stay with me, because this is actually the most liberating thing you can learn about conflict: Couples who happily stay together and couples who split up have the same 70% ratio.

Some people hear this and they think, "Great. I guess I just have to put up with it." And they're flat out wrong.

The difference is when the problem stops being something you can talk about and becomes something you *absolutely* cannot talk about. It's when the issue creates so much pain, so much defensiveness, so much hurt that you'd rather gnaw off your own arm than bring it up again. And avoidance is relationship poison.

Let's reverse this for a second: You have approximately 30% of your issues that are solvable. Typically questions like, "Who does the dishes on Saturday night?" or "How are we going to handle picking up Jack from daycare when we both work?". Those things are easily solvable. They answer the questions that begin with: *Who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *and how*.

But the 70% is different. It doesn't respond to problem solving skills alone. And once you stop trying to solve what can't be solved, you can start doing what actually works: Identify the real underlying problem, and then agree on a tentative workaround.

For example, you think you're arguing about spending versus saving, but really the person who wants to save grew up watching their parents lose their house and carries bone-deep fear of financial insecurity. You think you're arguing about punctuality, but really the person who's always late grew up feeling controlled and timed, and being on time feels like submitting to that same control. One is the tip of the iceberg; the other is what's truly underneath.

Until you get curious about those deeper meanings instead of trying to prove your position is right, **you're going to stay stuck.** The initial goal isn't resolution. It's moving from being stuck arguing about the tip of the iceberg to actually talking about what the real issue is underneath. From being enemies fighting over who's right to being teammates trying to understand both partners' real needs.

Your Next Move

Start with yourself before you try this with your partner. Take your most painful relationship disagreement and write down your answers to these two questions: What am I actually protecting underneath my position on this? What would it mean to me if my partner truly understood that? Most people have never articulated this, even to themselves. Do that first.

Then, when you're ready, bring those answers to your partner and ask them the same two questions. Your only job in that conversation is to understand their answers, not to evaluate them or counter them. Just understand them. And once they feel understood (make sure to ask them if they do), then and only then can you propose a workaround that won't trample all over each of your true needs.

If that conversation derails into the same argument you always have, that's important information: The hurt around this issue has accumulated to the point where you need a skilled professional to hold the space. That's not failure. That's an accurate read of what the problem actually requires.

Step 3:
Look For How Your Partner Screwed Up, Again...

When couples are upset with their partner, they often forget about a significant portion of their partner's good qualities. Not because they're ignoring them, but because their brain has stopped registering them as relevant. Your partner could be trying, reaching out, making an effort, and your nervous system is filtering it out before it even reaches your awareness.

I tell my clients that with this type of negative lens, your partner could screw up slightly, and it can feel like they hit you over the head with a sledgehammer. Or the opposite: They could bring you literal rainbows and a unicorn, and you'll pause, eyeing it cautiously, and mutter under your breath, "Thanks," and their partner will think, "Why do I even bother?"

This negative lens sits between you and your partner, and once it's in place, everything gets interpreted as hostile. "Will you please take out the recycling?" sounds like an attack. Your partner makes a joke and you hear sarcasm. They reach for your hand and you pull away.

This isn't about being overly sensitive or having poor communication skills. This is about what happened to your friendship and how you've been managing conflict. When you've accumulated enough small moments of hurt, disconnection, or disappointments, your nervous system learns to expect something bad.

Here's what makes this so destructive: You're not technically lying when you say your partner never does anything right. From inside a negative lens, that's genuinely what you see. Outside observers, however, who watch the same interaction see effort, see attempts at connection, and see kind behaviors. But your filter screens all of that out as irrelevant or potentially dangerous because if you let your guard down, **you might get hurt again.**

And here's the part that stops most people cold: **You cannot think your way out of this.** You can't just decide to be more positive. If you've hit me in the stomach every day for the past month, just saying to yourself, "Think positive" won't really cut it. It takes dedicated focus and time to rebuild your relationship over months, not just with a single conversation or a single romantic date night. You can't use affirmations or gratitude

journals or communication techniques to fix it. Those approaches fail because they're treating symptoms, not causes.

So what to do instead? Use the mirror approach.

I can look at the side view mirror in my car all I want. And yet no matter how hard I stare at it, I can't make objects look their actual size. The mistake is if I start assuming all cars (objects) are exactly the distance that I see them, and end up causing an accident.

However, the moment I say, "That object in the mirror *might* be closer than it appears. It might not," then I'll be able to drive responsibly and defensively. Just the awareness that their is a perceptual filter in place changes the equation dramatically.

You walk in to the room and your partner barely looks up at you. They *might* be ignoring you. They also might be engrossed in what they're doing and not be meaning to ignore you (which is a good conversation to have later). Your gut will still yell out "Danger!" But this time, you'll at least have a fighting chance.

Your Next Move

Pick three specific nice and good things your partner did this week. Not grand gestures. Small, ordinary acts of kindness. Write them down. Then ask yourself: How many more positive things might they have done that you filtered out completely? If you found the first part easy, your relationship is likely still in good waters and these chapters will accelerate what's already working. If you found it genuinely difficult to identify three things, that's not a character flaw and it's not evidence that your partner isn't trying. It means your threat-detection system has been on high alert long enough that it's now screening out neutral and positive information along with the negative. That's a neurological pattern, not a personality trait, and it changes through consistent, deliberate practice over time.

For the next 30 days, end each day by writing down one specific thing your partner did that was neutral or positive. Not a judgment about whether they deserved credit for it. Just a record that it happened. That single practice, done consistently, can help in starting to retrain the filter.

Step 4:
Have Conversations While You're Triggered...

Let me tell you something about what happens when you're in the middle of a heated argument with your partner and suddenly you can't think straight. Your heart's pounding like a jackhammer. Your hands are sweating. Your chest feels like someone's sitting on it. You might think you're just really upset, but what's actually happening is your body has declared World War III even though you're just sitting on your couch talking about who forgot to pay the electric bill.

When you're triggered like this, your brain literally stops working the way it's supposed to. I'm not being dramatic here. This is science. Your prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that helps you think rationally and hear what your partner's actually saying, gets muddled.

Meanwhile, your amygdala, the ancient part of your brain that's only concerned with threat and survival, takes the wheel. And believe me, your amygdala doesn't care about healthy communication or working through problems together. It only knows three moves: Fight, run away, or freeze up like a deer in headlights.

Now here's the kicker: Your nervous system treats the emotional threat of a difficult conversation with the same urgency it would give a physical threat. The intensity of the response doesn't match the actual danger, but your body doesn't stop to make that distinction.

Research shows us something remarkable: Couples whose bodies stay relatively calm during disagreements, whose heart rate stays below 100 beats per minute, those relationships get better over time. But couples who regularly get triggered during conflict? Their relationships deteriorate. Not might deteriorate. They do deteriorate.

You'll hear different numbers depending on who you ask. Athletes tend to have lower heart rates and consider 85 being triggered. Some people take medicine that accelerates their heart rate. Your best bet is gauge your heart rate with your smart watch or one of those $10 pulse oximeters from Amazon while you're calm. That's your baseline. Then test it again when you're feeling World War III coming on. That's your danger zone.

Your Next Move

The next time you feel your heart start to race during a disagreement, stop right there and ask yourself one simple question: Am I triggered, yes or no?

If the answer is no, then go ahead and keep talking (check your heart rate just to be sure).

If the answer is yes, then you have one other question to ask yourself: Do I want to make this worse, or do I want to survive the impulse to make it worse? Those are your only two options. And if you choose the former (my recommendation), you don't push through. You don't try to win the argument. Instead, you say "I'm getting overwhelmed and I need 30 minutes." You tell your partner where you're going and exactly when you'll be back. Then you keep that promise like your relationship depends on it (because it does).

And if you're the partner hearing that, you let them go without guilt-tripping or following. You need to trust that they're coming back. Yes, they might fail at first. You're trusting that the two of you can troubleshoot how to take these breaks in the future when things are calmer.

Remember, this isn't about who's right or wrong. This is about whether you're serious about building a relationship that lasts or you're content to keep having the same destructive fights until there's nothing left to fight for.

Step 5:

Use Your Complaints as Tactical Weapons...

Imagine you say to your partner, “You forgot to call when you were running late.” That’s a complaint. That’s about a specific behavior. That’s workable. Even understandable.

But what if your frustration takes over? Then something shifts. And suddenly you find yourself saying “You’re so inconsiderate. You never think about anyone but yourself!” And right there, in that moment, everything changes. **You’ve switched from talking about what your partner did to making a judgment about who your partner is.** Their character. You’ve taken your complaint and used it as a weapon.

Here’s what makes this so devastating: When you criticize someone’s character, their brain doesn’t hear “Here’s feedback I can work with.” Instead, their brain hears “What you did is so bad that there’s something wrong with you as a person.”

That's not a behavior they can correct. That’s an identity they have to defend. When someone hears that kind of threat, their nervous system does exactly what it’s designed to do. It goes into threat mode. activates the fight-or-flight response. And any possibility of productive conversation evaporates like water on a hot concrete. And your relationship absorbs another hit it may not fully recover from.

Now here’s the part that makes this so insidious: Criticism doesn’t feel like you’re hurting your relationship when you’re doing it. **It feels like you’re finally being honest.** Finally addressing the root cause. Finally not tiptoeing around the truth.

But criticism is the gateway drug to relationship death. And before you know it, you stop bringing things up because you know it won’t go well, and the silence between you grows until you’re living like strangers who happen to share an address.

People don’t criticize because they’re mean. They criticize because they’re scared. Scared that nothing will change. Scared that if they don’t make it big enough and loud enough, their partner won’t hear them. Scared that they’re going to have to live with disappointment forever. But here’s the brutal truth: The bigger and louder you make it, the less likely your partner is to hear the actual need underneath it. Especially if you attack their character.

Your Next Move

The next time frustration rises, ask yourself one question before you speak: "Am I about to describe what happened, or am I about to label who they are as a person?" If you're about to say "you always" or "you never" or "you're so" anything, stop. Then reframe it by asking yourself: What did they actually do? How did it affect you? What do you need going forward? That's your complaint. Lead with that. "You forgot again" turns into "When plans change without warning, I feel dismissed. I need us to communicate those changes in the moment." Same frustration. Completely different target.

Step 6:
Defend Yourself at Every Turn...

Your partner says, “You said you’d call your mom about this weekend. Did you do it?” Simple question. But then, out comes your flippant response: “I’ve been swamped at work, keeping a roof over our heads. Maybe if you weren’t so busy butting into my business, I’d be able to think straight.”

That’s a problem. You fired back with a loaded weapon. Loaded with accusations and martyrdom. **And it’s killing your relationship one conversation at a time.**

Here's what that response actually communicates, whether you mean it to or not: That you don't take your partner's concerns seriously. That you won't take responsibility for your part in the problem. And that they’re at fault for bringing it up in the first place. Three messages, none of them intentional, all of them damaging.

Reacting defensively almost never achieves what you want it to. It doesn’t make your partner back down. It doesn’t make them apologize. It doesn’t make them realize they were wrong. **Instead, it escalates the conflict** and creates a negative cycle until both of you are exhausted and further apart than when you started.

I’m not the biggest sports fan. But I do know one thing: When one team plays defense, the other team… plays offense. It’s a lock-and-load cycle. But here's what makes defensiveness particularly destructive: **The very act of defending yourself confirms the thing you're trying to deny.** When you respond with excuses and counterattacks, you're demonstrating in real time that you're not taking your partner seriously and that you’re not taking responsibility, which is precisely what your partner was worried about in the first place. You intended to prove them wrong. Surprise: You ended up proving them right.

So what's the alternative? The solution sounds almost too simple to work: Give a little. Admit ownership of your part of the issue, even if it’s small. That doesn’t mean that you’re going to take all the blame or even that your partner is in the right. But you do need to find something, anything, that you can own. That single move, owning even a sliver of it, does more to de-escalate a conversation than any explanation or counterargument you could offer. It breaks the cycle, or at least gives your partner a fighting chance.

Your Next Move

The next time your partner brings up a concern and you feel that familiar urge to explain or point out how they're wrong, stop. Take two breaths. Four seconds. And then ask yourself one question: "Is there even 5% truth in what they're saying?" If there is, and there almost always is, acknowledge that 5%. Say "You're right about that part." Watch what happens.

Step 7:

Let Your Partner Know What You REALLY Think of Them...

Out of all the most destructive things you can do in your relationship is to communicate, on some level, that your partner is fundamentally flawed as a human being.

Imagine being upset at your partner and saying, “You’re so stupid. How could you forget? I asked my friend Amy, and she agrees that her husband would never do what you did. You’re such an imbecile!”

But the problem is that when you verbally attack your partner that way, when you roll your eyes, use a seething tone, or use mockery, you essentially are saying, ”You’re beneath me. I am better than you. I am smarter, more moral, more competent, more worthy of respect than you.” **And it’s the single most powerful predictor of relationship destruction.**

This type of disrespect rarely feels like disrespect from the inside. From your perspective, you’re just reacting honestly to something frustrating (have you noticed a theme yet?). You’re finally saying what's been building for too long. **But your partner doesn't experience it that way.**

That eye roll communicates, “What you just said is so stupid it doesn't deserve a real response.” That sarcastic tone doesn't tell your partner they made a mistake. **It tells them they are a mistake.** And once this kind of disrespect becomes a regular feature of your interactions, your partner stops bringing things up to you. Not because they've stopped caring, but because the cost of being met with that kind of dismissal is too high to keep paying.

So instead, speak from your own experience. Describe what you feel, what situation you're feeling it about, and what you need. The formula is straightforward: “I feel [emotion] about or when [describe the situation neutrally]. I need [what would help and what you want, not what you don’t want].”

Your partner forgot groceries they agreed to get. The haughty response: “Are you incapable of remembering simple things? Do I need to write everything down like you're a child? You're so unreliable.” The alternative: “I feel frustrated when the groceries don't get picked up because I was planning to cook that specific meal tonight. I need us to figure out a system where we're both clear on who's handling what.” Same frustration underneath. Completely different delivery.

Your Next Move

When you feel disdain for your partner rising, stop. Take two breaths. Then ask yourself: Am I about to speak from a position of looking down, or am I about to share what I actually feel and need? Restate it using the formula above before you open your mouth. Every eye roll, every sarcastic comment, every dismissive gesture is a withdrawal from your relationship's account. And here's the thing about those withdrawals: They don't just reduce the balance. Over time they change what your partner believes is possible between you. Contempt doesn't make you superior. It just makes you alone.

Step 8:

Stop Talking During Difficult Conversations...

Imagine your partner is sitting three feet away, but they might as well be on another planet. Their arms are folded across their chest. Their eyes are fixed on a spot near their shoes. Not on you. Not even in your general direction. Just down. Their face is completely still. No expression. No movement. No flicker of acknowledgment that you're even speaking. And with each word you say, your partner becomes more motionless. More unreachable. It's like watching someone build an invisible fortress around themselves, brick by brick, made entirely of silence.

When we shut down like this, inside we're not only trying to protect ourselves. There's a war waging inside, and every alarm system in your body is screaming at you to stay safe. What looks like cold indifference is actually overwhelming panic. Chances are your heart is racing but your face doesn't show it.

And here's what the internal monologue actually sounds like: "Don't say anything. Just don't say anything. Everything you say makes it worse." "How long can she keep this up?" "I could say something, but no. Don't bring that up. Don't say anything." "If I can just hold on for ten more minutes..."

Unfortunately, this type of shutting down also ends up sending an unintentional message: "You don't matter to me. I don't care about your feelings." Which is ironic, because the actual message is "I'm overwhelmed. I can't process this."

So don't just shut down. Tell your partner what's happening to you. Because right now, they're interpreting your silence as indifference. You need to tell them it's not indifference, it's overload. Then you actually have to calm your nervous system down. The single most effective tool? Breathing. Slow, deliberate, deep breathing. When you're ready, let your partner know that you'd like to try again. That they're important to you and that you appreciate their patience.

Your Next Move

The next time you feel that urge to shut down, recognize it for what it is: Your nervous system going into emergency mode. You have a choice in that moment.

Don't just go silent. Use whatever words you have to name what's happening. Even something as simple as "I'm getting overwhelmed and I need a few minutes" is enough. That one sentence transforms your silence from abandonment into information. Your partner now knows you're not checked out. You're flooded.

Then actually calm your nervous system down. Leave the room if you need to. Breathe slowly and deliberately. Do something that genuinely settles your body, not something that keeps you mentally rehearsing the argument. Give it at least twenty minutes, because that's roughly how long it takes for your physiological arousal to return to baseline.

When you're ready to return, don't just walk back in and pick up where you left off. Acknowledge the rupture first. Something like: "I'm sorry I went quiet. I wasn't trying to shut you out. I got overwhelmed and needed to reset. I'm here now and I want to hear what you were saying." That's not weakness. That's the repair attempt that makes coming back mean something.

Step 9:

Focus on Being Right Rather Than Making Repairs...

Every single conversation you have with your partner is filled with tiny moments where you miss each other's meaning, where your tone lands wrong, where their words hit a tender spot you didn't even know was there. It happens in every relationship. The real question is what you do when you notice it happening.

Because that's what repair is. It's the emergency brake in your relationship. The moment you notice things going sideways, you stop. You acknowledge it. You course-correct. And you keep your conversation from careening off a cliff.

Imagine you say something critical. And then you catch yourself. "Wait, I don't think that came out the way I meant it. Let me try again." Or let's flip it: Your partner is the one who says something critical and they don't catch it. That's where it's your turn: "Hey, that came across a bit harsh. Can you say that softer please? It would mean a lot to me." And that's the interesting thing about repairs: **Either parter can initiate them.**

But here's what's not a repair: Anything that avoids your feelings. Phrases like "Let's think about this rationally" or "You're getting too worked up" don't work. They cut off both of you from your emotions. You have to make your partner feel heard and understood before their brain can even process logical alternatives.

For a repair to be effective, you can't wait until things are burning down to grab the fire extinguisher. You have to notice the first wisps of smoke and deal with any missteps right away. Treat it like spilling grape juice on a white carpet: You have five seconds, at most. That's when you leap in with a repair. These aren't dramatic interventions. They're tiny course-corrections that prevent the conversation from drifting into dangerous territory.

Your Next Move

The next time you're in a difficult conversation and things start going sideways, you have five seconds to change everything. Stop talking. Take one breath. Then reach for a repair. It doesn't need to be eloquent. “I don't think that came out right, let me try again.” “I'm getting defensive, give me a second.” "That landed harder than I meant it to.” “I can hear you're upset and I want to understand.” “Can we slow down?” Any of these, said genuinely and said quickly, does more to protect the conversation than anything you could say by pushing through. Repair isn't about having perfect conversations. It's about catching yourself before the hurt becomes damage.

Step 10:

Make Sure to Take Your Partner for Granted...

Here's what most couples don't realize: **You can know everything about your partner, their schedule, their preferences, their habits, and still fail to communicate that you like them.** You can memorize their coffee order, anticipate their needs, manage a household together, and never once express genuine admiration for who they are as a person.

This means training yourself to notice: What did my partner do today that made life better? What quality did they demonstrate that I admire? What small gesture showed they were thinking of me? Then, and this is the crucial part, saying it out loud.

But don't do it like a performance review. Statements like "You're such a good partner" or "I really admire how hard you work for our family" sound sincere but land hollow because they're untethered from anything real. Your partner hears the sentiment but can't feel it because there's nothing specific enough to hold onto. It's warmth without substance. It checks a box but doesn't touch the heart.

Instead, connect your partner's trait with how it affected you, and watch the difference: "*You're such a loving person. I was thinking about when your colleague Sarah was going through that divorce last spring. She canceled plans with you three times because she was overwhelmed. I could see you were disappointed. But instead of taking it personally, you sent her flowers with a note that said 'No pressure, just want you to know I'm here whenever you're ready.' Then two weeks later, you called her again. That's who you are. You show up for people with this incredible patience and generosity, even when it costs you something.*"

Can you feel the difference? The second version isn't just warmer. It's specific. You're giving your partner the gift of being truly seen. Not for what they do for you functionally, though that matters, but for who they are as a person.

Your Next Move

Think of one quality you genuinely admire in your partner. Not something vague. Something real. Then find the memory that proves it, a specific moment where you watched them demonstrate exactly that quality. Now go tell them. Not tonight. Not when the timing is better. Right now. Because after everything this book has asked you to stop doing, this is the one thing worth starting today.

Formula Review

The formula is straightforward:

"I feel [emotion] about or when [describe the situation neutrally]. I need [what would help and what you want, not what you don't want]."

This formula should start to sound familiar. It has many adaptations. It's time to be clear on how to use it, though.

During the early days of Covid, I ended up needing to buy a house (Note to self: Don't do that). And I met with a realtor to go over my list of requirements. As luck would have it, I had a list written and ready. She took one look at it, handed it back to me, and said, "This is a list of what you don't want. I can't help you if you do that to me."

Naturally, I objected. I didn't want to live in a dangerous neighborhood. I didn't want a small yard. I didn't want a broken down school bus nearby.

To which she said, "Look. There are two things working against you. The first is, it's Covid. There won't be a lot of choices. But the second and more important thing is that if you only look for what you don't want, nothing I show you will ever meet with your approval. And I won't work with you under that condition."

I'm a therapist, and I fell for the oldest trick in the book: Focusing on what we don't want, instead of what we do want.

Epilogue

You've just worked through ten of the most common patterns that erode relationships, not because couples stop loving each other, but because they never learned a better way to handle the moments that matter most. That's not a character flaw. It's a skill gap. And skill gaps are fixable.

What you have now is a map. You know what harsh startup costs you in the first three minutes of a conversation. You know the difference between a perpetual problem and a solvable one, and why confusing the two keeps you stuck. You know what flooding looks like from the inside, what contempt does to a relationship over time, and what a real repair attempt sounds like. That's not nothing. That's a foundation.

But a map is only useful if you actually move. Pick one pattern from these ten chapters, the one costing you the most right now, and work it consistently for thirty days before adding another. Change that sticks is narrow and deep before it's broad.

If you find yourself hitting a wall, if the patterns are too entrenched or the hurt runs too deep to shift on your own, that's not failure. That's information. Some of what you're navigating requires more than a book can offer. If you'd like support in doing this work, I'm available for couples therapy, relationship coaching, and structured education programs designed to go much deeper than what's covered here. You can reach me at davidlechnyr.com.

The relationship you want is built one conversation at a time. You already know more than you did an hour ago. That's where it starts.

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