

GETTING RELATIONSHIPS



RIGHT

How to Build
RESILIENCE and **THRIVE**
in Life, Love, and Work

MELANIE JOY, PhD

“Recommended reading for both individuals and therapists!”

—Harville Hendrix, PhD, and Helen LaKelly Hunt, PhD
Authors of *Getting the Love You Want*

Praise for *Getting Relationships Right*

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—**Harville Hendrix, PhD, and Helen LaKelly Hunt, PhD, coauthors of *Getting the Love You Want* and *Making Marriage Simple***

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MELANIE JOY, PhD



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*For those of you who are working toward relational growth
and who are therefore helping create a more relational world.*

*And for my beloved husband, Sebastian Joy, whose relational
magic has been my personal elixir.*

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1

Foundations of Relational Health

Building Resilient Relationships

If you think back over some of the greatest joys and gravest sorrows of your life, chances are many of them have to do with your relationships: the deep fulfillment and gratitude of finding your life partner, the lifesaving comfort of your best friend's support during a crisis, the heartbreaking feud that ruptured your family.

Our relationships have a profound impact on our lives, for better or worse. From the moment we're born, our relationships are setting the stage for how our lives will unfold, and they continue to powerfully influence virtually all aspects of our experience. Research shows that people who have healthy, fulfilling relationships—with romantic partners, friends, colleagues, family members, and so on—fare better in pretty much all areas of life. They live longer, they're at reduced risk for a variety of physical diseases and psychological problems, they're happier, and they're more likely to be successful in what they set out to do.¹ Furthermore, many of the most serious problems in the world today, such as war and corrupt political regimes, are caused largely by problematic ways of relating.

Yet despite the vital role relationships play in our lives and world, most of us have never been taught even the most basic

principles and skills for effectively managing them. So we end up hurting, and hurting others—often those we care for the most—in spite of our best intentions.

One of the most important things any of us can do, for our own well-being and for the well-being of those whose lives cross our path, is to improve our ability to relate. In so doing, we can significantly improve our quality of life. On top of this, we can grow toward our better selves, as we also help create a better world.

The Relational Immune System: Building Resilient Relationships

Healthy relationships are like healthy bodies: they thrive when their immune system is stronger than the germs they are exposed to. Creating a healthy relationship therefore requires keeping the relationship's immune system strong—which includes knowing how to identify and treat the germs, or external stressors, that challenge it.

A strong relational immune system is resilient. *Resilience* is the ability to withstand and bounce back from stress. In relationships, resilience is made up of two main features: security and connection. The more secure and connected a relationship is, the stronger—or the more resilient—it is. When a relationship is resilient, it's better able to resist the relational germs it's exposed to, just as a resilient body is less likely to get sick when it's exposed to a physical germ. If we're exposed to a germ, physical or relational, that's strong enough, our immune system can become depleted trying to fight it. We can end up weakened or sick, and we (or our relationship) may even die.

There are countless germs that can threaten the security and connection of a relationship, such as financial problems, addictions, psychological disorders, and the loss of a job. Once we know how to recognize and respond to such germs, we are less at risk of our relationship's being weakened by them. One type of relational germ is especially insidious, largely because it's invisible to even

many relationship experts and so can remain undetected and unaddressed for a lifetime. This type of germ is “psychosocial,” meaning that it affects our psychology and it stems from widespread social systems (which most of us are unaware of). This germ causes us to think, feel, and act in ways that disconnect us from each other and also from ourselves and the world, without our realizing what we’re doing. Because of the negative impact this germ can have on even the most resilient of relationships, a chapter of this book is dedicated to discussing it.

Interactions as the Building Blocks of Relationships

Interactions are the building blocks of relationships. Every time we interact with someone, we are relating to that person: a relationship is essentially a series of *dynamic interactions*—living interactions—among the people in it. (Sometimes dynamic interactions are referred to simply as “dynamics.”) And we are interacting pretty much all the time—with the cashier at the grocery store, with the commenters on our social media posts, with our life partner, and even with ourselves. We are always in a relationship, in one way or another.

Because a relationship is a series of interactions, each interaction offers the opportunity to interrupt a pattern of insecure, disconnecting relating (a *dysfunction*) and to practice secure, connecting relating. In other words, we can choose at any moment to change the way we relate and improve the direction in which our relationship is heading. So our daily life, our minute-to-minute experience, is like a training ground on which we can learn to develop relationship resilience and also grow as individuals.

Learning to recognize the elements of an insecure, disconnecting interaction and developing the skills to create a resilient one help us prevent problems in our relationships and quickly identify and effectively manage problems when they do arise. The more we practice resilient interactions, the better we get at doing so, and

the more secure and connected our relationships, and our lives, become.

Four Relationships, One Problem

The following anecdotes help illustrate some common challenges in relationships. And although each of these stories presents a seemingly unique relationship problem, they are really not that different. All of the relationships they describe reflect a counter-productive pattern of relating that's causing people who genuinely care about each other to hurt each other, and therefore to feel increasingly insecure and disconnected from each other. And none of the characters knows what to do in order to change the way they're interacting so that they increase, rather than decrease, the resilience of their relationship.

Alicia and Terrence: Married Yet Misunderstood

Alicia smiled to herself as she watched her nieces and nephews chase each other in haphazard circles around the grassy lawn, while they were at once screeching, giggling, and whining. It was the typical summer chaos, a comforting cacophony. Alicia loved being part of a large, extended family whose branches kept growing, its leaves unfurling across generations.

"What'll they think of next? Get-well cards for goldfish?" her brother snorted, rewarded by a collective guffaw by the rest of the adults seated around the picnic table. "I mean, 'With heartfelt sympathy for the loss of your *cherished feline companion*' is ridiculous enough, but imagine 'Sorry your *treasured amphibian companion* isn't feeling well!'"

Alicia felt her stomach clench. And, daring to look across the table at her husband, Terrence, she was crushed to see him chuckling alongside the others.

How *could* he? He knew she was still reeling from the loss of her beloved cat, who'd passed away just a month ago.

Alicia's heart sank. She thought Terrence, of all people, would have understood her.

But this wasn't the first time his not being tuned in to her feelings had hurt her. Alicia had just assumed that after all their talks about her needing him to be more emotionally attentive he'd finally started to be clued in.

She knew Terrence was a good man and that he truly meant well. Nevertheless, there was only so much emotional housecleaning she could continue doing before she burned out.

Her thoughts turning dark, Alicia decided that things would never be okay between them. Clearly, if Terrence couldn't figure out, after all this time, that laughing at an experience that was painful for her wasn't appropriate, he'd never get it. She'd never felt so alone.



Coughing to clear his throat—the jokes had been flowing, as they always did among Alicia's family, in an endless stream since he'd sat down—Terrence looked across the table and caught Alicia's eye. His mirth quickly turned to alarm, psychological red warning lights flashing in his head.

She had that look that he'd come to know so well—at once hurt, disappointed, angry, and disbelieving. He quickly took a mental inventory of the past few hours, something he'd gotten good at doing, scanning his recent interactions for missteps he hadn't noticed.

What had he done this time? Was it that he hadn't stopped her brother from carrying on about the card? He hadn't even really laughed so much, not like the rest of them, because he knew Alicia was still mourning the loss of her cat.

Terrence was sick of knowing he'd screwed up but not knowing how—of always feeling incompetent. He felt like whatever he did, it was never enough. He could never get it right.

Alicia and Terrence turned their eyes away from each other, both looking off into the distance, each staring into their own heartache.

Jeremy and Marco: Colleagues in Crisis

"I'm *done* with this partnership!" Jeremy slapped his hands on the table and hastily stuffed his papers into his attaché case. Ignoring the shocked expression on Marco's face, whose handsome features were frozen in astonishment, Jeremy stormed out of the office, slamming the door behind him. He strode toward the elevator, the long narrow hallway making the building seem more like a prison than the hub of liberation

it was meant to be, the center for the civil rights legislation he and Marco had arduously worked on over the past five years.

When they'd started their nonprofit organization, Jeremy and Marco were like peas in a pod; their social views were perfectly aligned, as was their commitment to the cause and to their mutual success. Where they differed, they complemented each other. Marco was the businessperson, the one who made the hard decisions when needs were in conflict, such as when they had to terminate a project after a donor pulled funding, laying off an entire team of employees. Jeremy was the social manager, the one who pushed back against choices that would hurt others and made sure that any unavoidable hard decisions caused as little harm as possible. Jeremy was the nice one.

Too nice, he thought now.

All those times he'd just gone along to get along. Every disagreement, every difference of opinion, Marco would push to get his way and Jeremy would eventually give up, exhausted from the debate, from trying to protect others—and himself—from Marco's insensitivity.

But not anymore. After this latest stunt of Marco's—suggesting they not give Christmas bonuses this year to try to offset the financial costs of the latest federal spending cuts—Jeremy was done. Something in him had snapped.

Walking out of the building, his hands still trembling, Jeremy found himself surprised at the intensity of his feelings, at his unexpected eruption. *Well, things have been building up for a long time*, he told himself. *I've hit my limit*. Some part of him knew he should have brought all of this up before, but he hated conflict. Plus, every time he'd tried to say something, to voice his concerns, Marco had seemed distracted, disinterested. What was he supposed to do? Did he have to scream and beg for Marco to take him seriously?

By the time he'd climbed into his car, his outrage had burned itself down. He slumped in the driver's seat, deflated, the last embers of anger giving way to a kindling sadness. The organization he and Marco had built, the work they'd done, was truly remarkable. Together, they were changing the world for the better, and Jeremy knew that neither of them could ever accomplish this work alone. It was their synergy that made it possible—and without their partnership, all the lives they were helping and all the lives they had yet to help would suffer. But he just couldn't see how they could ever find a way to make it work between them.

The slam of the door jolted Marco to his senses. *What the . . . ?* He watched Jeremy's back disappear through the smoky glass panes like a vanishing apparition. Marco had no idea where this outburst had come from. All he'd said was that they might want to consider holding off on Christmas bonuses this year—after all, the organization had taken a huge financial hit after the spending cuts, and they were dangerously close to having to do another round of layoffs. Marco's job was to find ways to keep the organization economically viable, to ensure that their decisions were always in the best interest of the greater good. Not getting Christmas bonuses would make a lot of people unhappy, but not being able to continue their work would make a lot more people a lot more unhappy.

Marco understood that Jeremy wanted to make sure that people didn't get hurt, and he valued Jeremy's empathy, even though it sometimes ironically got in the way of them doing the most good for others. In fact, this difference between them—Jeremy's being more emotionally driven and his being more rationally driven—was actually one of the things Marco appreciated most about their partnership. He'd thought Jeremy appreciated this difference, too, especially because their lively debates were what helped fuel the engine of their productive collaboration.

Or was there something else going on? Was Jeremy in financial trouble, more in need of his Christmas bonus than he'd let on? Was that what Jeremy had been wanting to talk about those few times he'd approached Marco, saying he wanted to “share some possible concerns”? But if it was so crucial to talk, why had Jeremy always backed down, saying he could see it was a “bad time” as soon as Marco had managed to shift mental gears from what he'd been working on? Or did Jeremy interpret Marco's inability to jump to attention as a sign of disinterest, a lack of caring?

Whatever was wrong with Jeremy, one thing was for sure. He obviously hadn't been honest with Marco, possibly for a very long time, and it was going to take a miracle for Marco to ever trust him again.

Sam and Ling: A Family Feud

As always, there was no preamble. Sam's mother launched into a ranting report of her estranged husband's—his father's—latest transgressions almost as soon as the host had seated them at their table. Sam hadn't seen his mother in two months. He'd since started a new job and moved to a different apartment, but none of that seemed to matter.

It was as if time was worsening, rather than healing, her wounds, prolonging her suffering rather than hastening her recovery. Each time he met with his mother, her pain was less patient, like building pressure in a heat-seeking missile that had Sam as its target, Sam as her hope—Sam at once as the hero and victim of her personal drama. Just like he'd always been.

“Parentified” was how his therapist had described his relationship with his mother. He'd taken on—or, rather, been assigned—the role of parent. And he needed to stop “enabling” her, to stop acting like her father. Sam wasn't a fan of jargon, but he had to admit that his therapist was onto something. It had been almost a year since his parents had broken up—a choice Sam had strongly encouraged, and a process he'd coached his mother through. But instead of growing into her potential, she seemed to be shrinking into herself, becoming ever more self-focused and isolated.

Even though he knew he needed to stop being his mother's rescuer, Sam just couldn't bring himself to do it. Despite her “narcissistic tendencies,” she was still his mother. And he couldn't just pull the rug out from under her in her time of need; she'd never recover from such a betrayal, and she'd never be able to get through this crisis without him. Even in less stressful times, he was always there to carry her, always Sam the Caretaker, Sam the Responsible One.

Resigned to his fate—at least for now—Sam forced himself to make the right noises and expressions. He felt slightly guilty for not being more present for his mother, but there really wasn't any point; she was trapped on a psychological treadmill that nobody could stop but her.

Still, he felt despondent about the fact that he'd become so disconnected from his mother; he felt numb to her pain, disinterested in her world. He wanted to care more. There was just no space for the real Sam in their relationship.



Even my own son couldn't care less about the fact that my life is falling apart. Does he really believe he can just nod and grunt and stare at me with those unfocused eyes and think I don't know he'd rather be anywhere but here?

Ling abruptly reined in her thoughts, as she caught herself heading down a thorny path she'd promised herself she'd steer clear of. Of course, she made the same vow every time she visited with her son, hoping to keep from dragging him into her dark ruminations. And yet

here she was, getting angry at Sam, blaming him for her pain. Instead of keeping him out of harm's way, she was pulling him right in front of it. Again.

Why couldn't she stop herself? Why couldn't she do what she knew was right? It was as if she was continuously chasing the self she knew she could be, a self that was always in sight but never in reach.

Shana and Jeannette: Friends Falling Out

"How could we *possibly* not have seen that as hideous?" Shana groaned, handing Jeannette back the old yearbook that boasted photos of them, twenty years ago, in full mullet glory. "I mean, what were we *thinking*?"

"We *weren't* thinking," Jeannette replied, as abashed—and amused—as Shana.

Sitting on a stool at Jeannette's shiny kitchen island as Jeannette made them both lunch, Shana basked in the comfort of their shared reminiscence. She felt nostalgia brimming inside her, like simmering chocolate, bubbly and melty, a bittersweet mix of emotions.

"You know, I could make my peace with the bad hair and wardrobe malfunctions," Jeannette said, her voice dancing with mirth. "It's the Jess Johnson kinds of mistakes I'll never forgive myself for." At the mention of their shared middle school crush—who, much to their pubescent horror and then to their wild amusement (once the shock had worn off) had turned out to be a girl who'd been passing as a boy—Shana felt herself freeze up. She still felt guilty for how they'd both recoiled from, and laughed at, someone whose gender was different from the norm.

Of course, the 1970s were a different time, with a different social landscape. But still. Just because they didn't know better than to judge people who were gender nonconforming then, that certainly didn't make it appropriate now—something she'd explained to Jeannette multiple times. And how did Jeannette think *Shana* was feeling? Was this a barb, a passive-aggressive attack on Shana's own gender orientation, which she'd told Jeannette she'd been questioning?

"What?" Jeannette asked, unfazed, sitting down beside Shana. "You can't deny it was funny at the time. Hell, you laughed as much as any of us." Seeing Shana's unchanged expression, she added, "You don't think I'm saying anything about *you*, do you? Jess—*Jessica*—was a total weirdo, even without the gay part. I mean, just think about his—

her—their—whatever they say these days—red, white, and blue high-heeled sneakers!”

It was always the same; it had been for the past five years, ever since Shana had become more socially aware and realized that funny wasn't always funny and friends weren't always fair. Lately, as soon as the conversation turned to something real, something here and now—to politics, values, ideas about the world—the conversation went stale. Worse, it usually turned into an argument, with Jeannette saying something offensive to Shana, who would then withdraw and disengage.

What saddened Shana most was that, although it was true that the once inseparable pair had grown apart, there was still a bond between them, a bond based on genuine affection, on knowing and being known over decades of experiences; a rare and irreplaceable bond. Shana just didn't know how to honor their connection without compromising herself, and it grieved her that she felt she had to choose between them.



Jeannette couldn't keep up. She saw Shana only once, maybe twice a year these days, since Shana had moved from their small midwestern town to Boston, but each time they got together, it was as though Shana had developed a whole new set of sensitivities that came with a whole new, and foreign, vocabulary. They used to have their own, special code that nobody else understood; they used to joke that they were telepathic. Now they were speaking different languages.

Gender nonconforming. Why couldn't Shana just say “gay”? What's the point of changing words so fast nobody can follow what's actually being said? Was Shana somehow ashamed of her own sexuality, so she had to jump on the bandwagon of hip, elitist jargon?

But it wasn't really the terminology, Jeannette reminded herself. It was that Shana had changed into a person Jeannette couldn't relate to anymore. Jeannette had nothing against Shana's sexuality (or was it “gender”? What was the difference?)—or anyone's, for that matter. She actually agreed with most of Shana's views, when Shana took the time to explain them to her in plain English. It was just that Shana always seemed so impatient with her, so judgmental of her “small-town” way of thinking, as Shana had once put it. It was so easy to offend Shana and so difficult to talk with her.

Jeannette knew she wasn't the most politically sophisticated person, that her social awareness lagged way behind Shana's, and that

she made mistakes in her choice of words. But if Shana couldn't treat her like the dear friend she was instead of acting as if she was a political opponent, they'd continue to clash rather than communicate, until they stopped talking altogether.

Alicia, Terrence, Sam, and the others are in a great deal of pain. They are also causing those they care for to suffer—not because they're unkind or unintelligent but because, like most people, they have never been taught the basic principles and practices of creating a resilient relationship, including how to communicate about their different needs and beliefs.²

It's an unfortunate reality that most of us must learn complicated geometry that we'll probably never use, yet we never get a single lesson in how to relate to others (and ourselves, as we're always relating to ourselves, whether we're aware of it or not) in a way that's healthy and empowering.³ The majority of what we understand about relationships we've learned from our parents and other caregivers, our culture, and Hollywood. For the most part, none of these is an especially healthy model. In fact, just the contrary is true; much of what we are taught is dysfunctional. So we spend a great deal of time trying to figure out, on our own, how to get our relationships right, often experiencing, and causing, much heartache in the process.

The good news for Alicia, Terrence, Sam, and anyone who wants to improve their relationships—whether with family, friends, colleagues, or a romantic partner—is that they don't have to keep stumbling through them without clear guidance, learning through trial and error. Virtually every one of us has the potential to significantly improve our relationships. All we need is to learn and practice the principles and tools for creating healthy relationships—for building *relationship resilience*.

Getting Relationships Right

This book is meant to act as a one-stop guide to getting relationships right, so you can build more resilient relationships. The principles and tools presented here are based on a vast amount of information from the most relevant and cutting-edge research in the field of relationships, which I have synthesized and woven together, drawing on my own extensive experience as a relationship coach and psychologist, providing unique new insights. And unlike most other books on improving relationships, *Getting Relationships Right* addresses not only the psychological elements of how we relate but also the powerful, yet invisible, social forces that drive many relational behaviors. Furthermore, the focus of this book is not limited to romantic relationships; it looks at all kinds of relationships, including those with family members, colleagues, friends, and even acquaintances. And all the concepts are presented clearly and succinctly, with straightforward, actionable advice.

If Alicia, Terrence, Sam, and the others were to improve their interactions even slightly, they could change the direction in which their relationships are heading. And even if only one of the parties in their respective relationships were willing to change the way they relate, that person could change the dynamic of the whole relationship. So that's more good news: you don't have to be an expert to significantly improve your relationships, and you can improve your relationships on your own.

With an understanding of the principles and practices for building relationship resilience, each of us can create the secure, connected, and fulfilling relationships we all want and deserve.