

**COUPLES**  
**CONVERSATIONS™**

**Vol 3.**

*Reignite the Spark*

*Romance, Fun, Passion & Intimacy*

**Dr. Ari Sytner, PhD, LCSW, M.Ed**

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Couples Conversations™

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## **DEDICATION**

*To my best friend, Chana, who truly knows me, loves me, and  
inspires me every day of this crazy adventure we call life.*

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## INTRODUCTION

# **Why I Wrote This Book About Fun, Intimacy, and Romance**

When I was a freshly minted couples therapist, having completed my PhD and chasing my passion as a licensed clinical social worker, I hit the ground running. With the best training and the highest level of certification from the Gottman Institute, I was eager to help couples reduce conflict, improve communication, and rekindle their emotional and physical intimacy.

It has certainly been an incredible journey, and I feel deeply grateful to go to work every day doing what I love, helping couples strengthen their relationships and rediscover their connection.

Yet, over the past several years, I began noticing a troubling shift in the couples I was seeing. More were describing a kind of emotional distance I hadn't encountered as frequently before. I was noticing more disconnected, checked-out couples and less passionate, charged conflict.

Was it due to our increased screen time and dependence on technology? Was it a residual effect of pandemic lockdowns and prolonged isolation? I couldn't say for certain. But what I could see clearly was a growing pattern: couples describing a nightly routine where they lie in bed, each silently scrolling on their own devices before shutting off the lights and going to sleep.

No conversation. No connection. No intimacy.

Then, when couples finally wanted to connect, they would often report not knowing how to begin. It was as though there was an invisible wall between them, creating an awkward distance, which neither felt comfortable addressing.

When that cycle repeats, day after day, month after month, it gradually becomes the norm. Eventually, many couples find themselves struggling to re-engage, wondering when the warmth faded and worrying whether there is a path back to it.

Seeing this new reality compelled me to ask:

How can I help empower ordinary, intelligent couples to bridge that divide and guide them back to the kind of connection that made them choose each other in the first place?

When I searched for tools to recommend, I found plenty of games and lighthearted books intended to spark dialogue. Many were fun

and creative, but they weren't clinically grounded, rooted in research, or based on what I was hearing in real time from couples in therapy.

Therefore, I decided to create something that was both clinically informed, scientifically grounded, and highly practical.

As a researcher and professor who gets excited about data, I immersed myself in the science of successful relationships. I reviewed current research, integrated it with my years of clinical experience, and identified 15 foundational topics that happy, healthy couples tend to engage in over time.

These include the "big" topics, like money, sex, and parenting, but also the deeply personal ones that actually shape emotional safety and secure attachment in a healthy relationship.

The first volume in this series addressed and reinforced the critical foundations of the relationship. The second volume enhanced the communication needed to sustain and nurture it. After all, without strong communication, even the simplest topics can quickly erupt into big fights.

This third volume turns toward something different, something that couples often describe as what they miss most, yet find hardest to name. Not the absence of communication or conflict, but something more like the absence of excitement and delight in one another. The quiet disappearance of romance, physical closeness, and the playful ease that once made the relationship feel alive and not simply functional.

These are not luxuries. Research consistently shows that couples who maintain physical affection, shared laughter, and intentional

romance report significantly higher relationship satisfaction and resilience over time. What looks like a relationship drifting apart may not actually be a “broken” relationship. Rather, it may simply be a couple that has stopped playing and having fun together.

This book is designed to bring that back through guided conversation. Through honest, curious, and sometimes unexpected questions, this book invites couples to rediscover what drew them together, what still lights them up, and what they are ready to explore next.

The conversations in this volume will guide you back to what ignites your bond most: the romance, the closeness, and the joy that make a relationship feel truly alive.

This book invites couples to explore a range of conversations about romance, physical connection, and the playful spirit that keeps a relationship vibrant across every season of life. As with every question in the Couples Conversations™ series, the questions in this book were created with intention and purpose, aiming to spark connection across multiple dimensions, including: physical, sexual, emotional, intellectual, psychological, spiritual, and even existential.

It is my true hope that these conversations help you rediscover one another, not just as partners in life, but with the respect and understanding of dynamically evolving individuals worthy of acceptance, care, attention, and lasting love.

— Dr. Ari Sytner, PhD, LCSW, M.Ed





PUTTING DOWN THE PHONE,  
*Picking Up the Conversation*

Let's be honest, when was the last time you and your partner had a conversation that wasn't about logistics, kids, bills, work, or what to watch on Netflix?

Remember a time when you first met, and you would talk for hours on end? Can you recall those late-night conversations where you lost track of time, discovering each other's worlds? Those were beautiful moments where “couples conversations” took you places with very little effort.

Yet, somewhere between mortgage payments, career demands, and the hypnotic glow of smartphones, those conversations can fade away. One day you look up and realize you're sharing a home but living in separate mental universes.

As a couples therapist, I see this dynamic day in and day out: couples sitting on my couch, genuinely caring about each other but no longer curious about each other. They can recite their partner's coffee order by heart but have no idea what stresses weigh on them at night, what victories they're secretly proud of, or what dreams they're hoping for in the coming years.

This isn't anyone's fault. Life gets busy, digital distractions multiply, and before you know it, years have gone by, and you're thinking, "I already know everything important about this person." However, the reality is that neither of you is the same as when you met years ago. As we advance through life, change is inevitable, leading to a distance that grows over time. In a sneaky way, this disconnection doesn't happen all at once. It creeps in slowly during times of blessing and stress and is often disguised as what others see as a successful couple, seemingly a well-oiled machine, able to juggle anything life throws at them.

## **When Conversation Fades, So Does Connection**

The statistics are sobering. Dr. John Gottman, the world's leading researcher on relationships, has cited findings from the Sloan Center at UCLA suggesting that the average dual-income couple spends only 35 minutes a week in conversation, and much of that conversation revolves around errands, logistics, and other practical matters! That's roughly five minutes a day of actual communication, barely enough time to coordinate schedules, let alone connect on a meaningful level.

When couples stop talking, disconnection starts to creep in. Suddenly, you might find yourself surprised (and not in a good way) by your partner's reactions. Living parallel lives means that you're operating on outdated information about each other, and you may be completely unaware of what matters now to them more than ever. Small irritations that could be easily addressed build up into resentments because they are not shared nor compassionately heard. When disconnection settles in, life's daily victories go uncelebrated, emotions get bottled up, and loneliness takes over. As a result of this distance, physical intimacy tends to dwindle as emotional connection flickers. This is when couples start reporting that they feel like roommates. As this dynamic evolved over time, most can't pinpoint where the rift developed.

While many couples recognize this state of what I call "parallel living" and feel as though they are "fine," years of research on relationships have found that "fine" is a dangerous place to be. You might be handling the logistics of life together brilliantly but secretly experiencing a quiet loneliness that begins to grow. It is that void which becomes the seed for future problems to take root in the relationship.

But here's the good news: **disconnection isn't permanent.**

What I share with the couples I work with is that the goal of couples therapy is not learning communication but building true connection. Whenever there is distance between two people, it feels as though there is a locked door between them, preventing them from reaching one another. Communication is simply the key to unlocking that door. With the right communication tools, couples can reawaken

curiosity, stimulate interest in one another, rebuild connection and excitement, and fall in love all over again.

## **The Solution: Couples Conversations™**

The antidote to conversational drought isn't complicated. You don't need a relationship overhaul or dramatic gestures, but it does require intention. Once you have the desire to invest in building connection, the next thing you need is something to talk about. You need questions (good ones) and the willingness to listen to the answers as you explore each other's inner worlds with genuine interest and curiosity.

That's what this book provides: thoughtfully crafted questions that bypass the surface layers and invite you into territories worth exploring together. These aren't generic conversation starters. They're doorways that peer into deeper aspects of yourselves and your relationship: your memories, values, fears, hopes, and the unique culture you've created together.

Some questions will make you laugh. Some might make you tear up. Others will reveal things you never knew about the person with whom you share your life.

**There are two goals that you will accomplish through these questions:**

- 1. You will experience the connection that comes with the exploration of each other's hearts and minds.**

- 2. By practicing these exchanges, you will build the muscle of curiosity that will make it intuitive and natural to maintain connection throughout your relationship.**

### **When You're Ready for More**

If you find these conversations meaningful and want to explore specific areas of your relationship more deeply, you'll find companion volumes to this book. Each contains hundreds of additional questions on topics like intimacy, communication, conflict, sex, parenting, money, dreams, and more.

Think of these companion books as specialized tools in your relationship toolkit, resources to support your ongoing journey of discovery together. They continue to offer new pathways of understanding and connection as your relationship evolves.

### **A Note About Professional Support**

Talking should be simple and easy, right? Well, for many couples, frustrations arise along the way and they quickly get sucked into cycles of conflict. If you find that certain discussions consistently lead to conflict or disconnection despite your best efforts, it's not a sign of failure, but valuable information.

Professional support from a highly qualified couples therapist can provide a structured environment to learn and practice

communication skills that better serve your relationship. A properly trained couples therapist will not try to solve your problems, but help you develop the tools to solve your own issues and strengthen connection for years to come. I always tell couples that the goal of therapy is not communication but friendship. Good communication is simply the key you will need to access that friendship. Once a couple is fluent in effective communication, they can most likely put their heads and hearts together to work out most issues on their own.

If you notice recurring communication difficulties or escalations that result from these frustrations, consider reaching out for support. Just as you wouldn't hesitate to consult a doctor for your physical health, an attorney for legal help, feel free to reach out to a qualified couples therapist to help your relationship when challenges arise. While these books are going to open up worlds of conversations, they are not intended to replace clinical support and therapy for those who suffer from mental-health challenges and require professional support.

### **One Final Thought**

In my years of working with couples, I've noticed something interesting: the happiest pairs aren't those with the fewest problems or the most impressive achievements. They're the ones who maintain genuine curiosity about each other and never stop asking questions to learn more about the person they love.

This book is an invitation to reclaim that curiosity. To remember that your partner isn't a known quantity but a mystery you get to keep unpacking and exploring. To recognize that the most valuable gift you

can give each other isn't expensive jewelry or grand gestures, but the simple, profound act of paying attention and showing you care.

The pages ahead hold not just questions, but possibilities: for deeper understanding, renewed appreciation, and the kind of connection that makes all the logistics and challenges of shared life worthwhile. So pour that coffee (or wine), put the phones away, look each other in the eyes, take a slow, deep breath, and rediscover the person you love.



# HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

*(The Practical Stuff)*

Below are 15 principles to help you get the most from these conversations. Think of them as guideposts for emotional connection, not rigid rules, but supportive habits that can help you get the most out of this book and your relationship.

Remember: this isn't a "read cover-to-cover" kind of book. It's a conversation tool to be dipped into, explored, and revisited over time. Some days you may feel drawn to deeper, more reflective topics. Other days, something light or playful might be just right. There's no set path here. Follow your energy and curiosity, not a rigid sequence.

## **1. SCHEDULE IT**

Yes, scheduling a conversation might sound unromantic, like penciling in passion. But here's the truth: if it's not planned, it probably won't happen. Life is full of interruptions and responsibilities, and good intentions often get swallowed by the day-to-day.

Setting a regular time for connection, maybe Sunday mornings over coffee or Thursday nights after the kids go to bed, creates consistency. It turns talking into a meaningful ritual that you look forward to, not just something you squeeze in when everything else is done. Block out anywhere from 10 to 30 minutes where your only focus is each other. That small investment pays huge dividends in deepening emotional closeness.

## **2. CREATE PHONE-FREE ZONES**

As much as we love our devices, they are serious distractions. Even a buzzing notification or glance at the screen can pull a couple out of a meaningful moment. The best thing to do is either power off your phones for a few minutes or put them in another room. The message in doing so is: "You matter more to me than anything that might show up on this screen."

It may feel uncomfortable at first, but the quiet it creates is fertile ground for real connection. You're not just removing distractions; you're reclaiming each other's full attention.

### **3. START SMALL**

These questions are intended for quality over quantity. Don't overload your time with too many questions. You are not on a game show trying to shout out the "right answers" under a ticking clock.

Instead, start with one or two well-chosen questions and go deep. Let the conversation unfold naturally. One powerful exchange is worth far more than a dozen rushed answers. You're not here to check boxes; rather, you're here to slow down, connect, and discover each other together.

### **4. SET A POSITIVE TONE**

Your environment sets the emotional stage. While we can't always have the perfect environment, there are always things we can do to enhance the mood. This may include turning on soft music in the background, sharing a cup of tea or a glass of wine, enjoying your favorite snacks, or simply sitting together in a cozy, quiet spot. The goal is to signal to your nervous system: this is safe, warm, and inviting.

When both people feel relaxed, curiosity and vulnerability flow more easily. You're not performing or fixing anything; you're simply sharing a moment of closeness.

## **5. APPROACH IT LIKE A DATE**

Remember the thrill of those early conversations? You likely were not multitasking or half-listening, but were fully present, eager to know more. When you wipe the slate clean and assume that you don't really know the other person, it lends itself to sparking real curiosity, as when you first dated. That same energy is still available to you now. Your partner may be familiar, but they're not fully known. People change. Layers emerge. Interests shift. This is your chance to be reintroduced to each other, again and again. Treat these moments as discovery, not obligation.

## **6. TAKE YOUR TIME WITH EACH QUESTION**

Think of the questions as doorways into meaningful territory, not items to quickly "get through." When you open up a question, stay in it; swim in those waters together and let one question lead to memories, stories, emotions, laughter, or even gentle silence. One thoughtful conversation that stays with you for days is more powerful than rushing through a list.

## **7. USE YOUR BODY TO COMMUNICATE**

Nonverbal signals matter just as much as words. Turn toward each other. Make eye contact. Nod. Smile. Hold hands if that feels right. Use your whole body to say, "I'm here with you."

These small gestures foster trust and emotional safety. They show your partner they're not just being heard; they're being felt.

## **8. PRACTICE POSITIVE CURIOSITY**

Curiosity is the lifeblood of long-term connection. Without it, we assume we already know our partner, when in reality, people change, and we risk missing those updates. Curiosity is the tool that allows us to keep falling in love again and again. It says, "I care enough to learn more." Instead of assuming you know your partner's thoughts or story, choose to explore them again with fresh eyes. Listen for the parts you've never heard before or the nuances that were never fully unpacked.

Remember that if curiosity opens the door, judgment slams it shut. When you are the one asking a question, your job is to really listen to your partner. Do your best to remove all judgment or preconceived ideas, even if you have a completely different opinion. In a curious state of mind, you can wonder and learn about the other's views and get to know how they see the world, rather than trying to share why you disagree.

A great technique for staying in that curious role is to ask follow-up questions. As you read the questions in this book, you will notice that most have a follow-up aimed at helping you dig deeper. Be sure to add your own as the conversations unfold.

For example:

- “What was that like for you?”
- “Tell me more about that.”
- “What made that moment matter so much to you?”
- “How could I better support you?”

Avoid questions that interrogate or criticize (especially when your partner is being vulnerable):

- “Are you sure that’s how it happened?”
- “Why do you make everything so dramatic?”
- “Well, that’s not true. Didn’t you say the opposite last time?”

The key to good listening is not to contradict or argue with your partner’s perspective, but to remain open to seeing the world through their eyes. These curious conversations are not about right or wrong, or setting the record straight, rather how to gain a deeper understanding of the other, especially when you have a different view.

## **9. LISTEN MORE THAN YOU SPEAK**

One of the greatest gifts you can give your partner is undivided, non-defensive attention. Let them share without interruption. Listen not to reply, but to understand.

Use simple signals: nods, soft “mmhmm” sounds, leaning in slightly. Think of it like enjoying a slow, delicious meal to be savored, not swallowed.

## **10. AFFIRM THEIR SHARING**

Vulnerability can be scary, even in committed relationships. When your partner opens up, create safety by showing them you are holding what they are saying with care. Try to affirm it by saying something like:

- “Thank you for telling me that.”
- “That was brave to share.”
- “I really appreciate your honesty.”
- "I loved learning about that side of you."
- "It felt really good to laugh together like that."

This builds emotional safety. When someone knows they’ll be met with respect and gratitude, not correction or criticism, they’re more likely to open up again.

## **11. TAKE A BREATHER IF NEEDED**

Not every conversation will feel light and easy. Some questions may surface deeper emotions or even disagreements. That’s okay. If the tension rises, take a slow breath and pause.

Say something like, “Let’s come back to this when we’re both feeling more centered.” Then flip to a lighter prompt or take a short walk. Connection grows in safety, not pressure.

## **12. FOLLOW THE TANGENTS**

These questions are meant to be starting points, not scripts. If one response leads you into a totally different memory, story, or insight, just follow it. Resist the urge to pull your partner back to the question at hand, and try to go with the flow wherever it takes you.

Sometimes the richest conversations grow from those unplanned detours. Trust the process. The goal is not to “finish the page,” but to rediscover each other along the way.

## **13. REFLECTING ON EACH CHAPTER**

At the end of each chapter, you’ll find a set of reflection questions designed to help you process and personalize your conversations. These prompts aren’t quizzes or tests, they’re invitations. Use them as a way to slow down, notice what stood out, and uncover insights that may not have surfaced in the moment. Simply by revisiting and processing what was learned or discovered can help deepen the feeling of connectedness.

You can answer these questions together in dialogue, take turns responding, or even journal your answers separately and share them later. However you choose to engage, this space is meant to

deepen your learning and solidify the growth that's unfolding in your relationship, one conversation at a time.

## **14. SKIP AROUND THE BOOK**

You will notice checkboxes next to each question. These are there to invite you to jump around to the questions that speak to you and not to feel the pressure of going in order. Just check off the questions you've discussed as you go and enjoy the journey of wherever the questions take you. (For a real challenge, feel free to revisit checked questions later and see if new conversation emerge).

## **15. HAVE FUN!**

Take a breath and remember to laugh and have fun. This experience is the feeling of going deeper into one another's inner world, building connection and strengthening your shared love. That should be something worth enjoying!

# QUICK SUMMARY FOR MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS

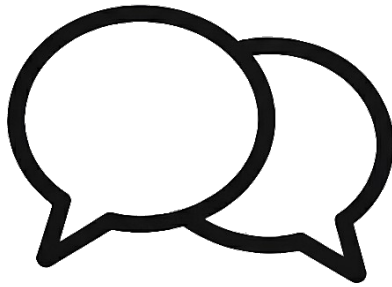
- 1. Schedule it:** Set intentional time for meaningful connection.
- 2. Go phone-free:** Eliminate distractions; give undivided attention.
- 3. Start small:** Focus on quality over quantity of questions.
- 4. Set the tone:** Environment should feel calm, safe, and inviting.
- 5. Treat it like a date:** Be present and curious.
- 6. Go deep, not fast:** Stay with emotionally significant moments instead of moving on too quickly.
- 7. Use your body:** Eye contact, body language, and gentle touch.
- 8. Practice curiosity:** Ask clarifying questions before reacting or forming conclusions.
- 9. Listen to understand:** Resist the urge to defend or solve issues.
- 10. Affirm vulnerability:** Show appreciation for openness.
- 11. Pause when needed:** Slow or pause conversations if needed.
- 12. Follow the tangents:** Just go with any organic detours.
- 13. Reflect together:** Process what you learned after each chapter.
- 14. Skip around:** Follow what interests you.
- 15. Keep it Fun:** Remember that connection should feel energizing, not like an obligation.





## CHAPTER 3

# Reignite the Spark



There was a time, early in your relationship, when being near each other felt like its own reward. You didn't need a reason to reach for your partner's hand or to linger over a conversation long after it had run out of practical purpose. Something in the other person held your attention in a way that felt almost involuntary; you wanted to know more, to be closer, to understand what was happening behind their eyes. Romance was not something you scheduled or planned for. It arrived on its own, uninvited and entirely welcome, in the middle of an ordinary afternoon.

Most couples can still find that memory, even if it feels far away. What they struggle to explain is how the same two people who once could not imagine life without this excitement between them, now arrived at something so different. How did they morph into a couple that functions beautifully on the surface but feels, in private, like it is missing something essential?

**This is the question that brings most couples to Volume 3.**

Not crisis or catastrophe. Not the sharp ruptures of betrayal or dramatic conflict, which are addressed in other places. The couples who find their way to this book are often doing “fine” by most visible measures. They have built a life together that works. They show up for each other in the ways that matter. But somewhere in the architecture of that life, the spark has gone quiet, and neither person knows quite how to find their way back to it.

Before you read a single question in this book, it is important to acknowledge and release any shame or guilt that you might be holding. The fact that you are reading these pages is not a sign of failure, but strength and commitment. Every relationship struggles in these areas at some point. It is one of the most predictable and well-documented patterns in all

of relationship science, and more importantly, it is one of the most responsive when you put in the effort to improve it.

## **The Science Behind the Fade**

Although studying early romantic love from a scientific lens may not sound very sexy, it has incredible impacts on what we now know about building and maintaining a strong relationship. Each couple infuses their own neurobiological signature into the start of their relationship. Understanding it changes the way couples interpret what has happened to them.

Dr. Helen Fisher, the late biological anthropologist and Senior Research Fellow at the Kinsey Institute, spent decades studying differences in the brain when a person is in love. Through neuroimaging research, she found that the early stages of romantic attraction activates the brain's reward circuitry, firing away on dopamine which is the same system that drives motivation, pursuit, and the experience of novelty.

In plain terms, when you first fell for your partner, your brain was doing something resembling a wild adventure, rather than sitting comfortably at a café on a date. During the courtship there is a dance of uncertainty, curiosity,

playfulness, and excitement, all leading to the discovery of another person. Throughout the process, as your dopamine levels are elevated, your nervous system responds with a sense of presence, urgency and aliveness.

Dopamine, it turns out, is a novelty chemical. It responds powerfully to what is new, uncertain, and not yet resolved. As familiarity deepens, as your partner becomes genuinely known to you, as the uncertainty of early pursuit gives way to the security of sustained commitment, the dopamine circuitry naturally quiets. This is not a sign that something has gone wrong. It is precisely what is supposed to happen as a relationship matures from attraction into attachment, and couples who understand this stop blaming themselves or each other for a transition that was always going to come.

What replaces it, when couples successfully navigate this transition, is a different neurochemical experience entirely. Oxytocin, sometimes called the bonding hormone, is released through sustained physical closeness, meaningful eye contact, unhurried touch, and sexual intimacy, and it carries the chemistry of deep belonging rather than urgent pursuit. Where dopamine creates the restlessness of early desire, oxytocin creates the steadiness of genuine attachment. These are profoundly different experiences, and both are forms of love, but they do not feel the same in the

body, and couples who are waiting for the early dopamine experience to return may be inadvertently dismissing something richer that is available to them right now. The spark in a long-term relationship does not look like the spark at the beginning. It is built from different materials, and it requires a different kind of tending.

The problem, for most couples, is not that this transition happened. It is that no one told them it was coming, or what to do when it arrived. Sadly, as a result, when many couples begin to plateau, they see it as a sign of failure and may even begin to question whether they made a mistake in committing to the wrong person. In reality, however, this is simply a natural part of the maturity and evolution of every relationship.

### **The Tripod of Intimacy**

I often tell the couples I work with that the spark we are trying to ignite is not just one specific thing. Instead, think of it as a tripod with three legs, each equally essential.

**The first leg is emotional intimacy, which is the experience of being genuinely known by your partner.** Not known in the shallow sense that comes from sharing a home for years, but known in the way that only happens when

you actively build deep emotional connection and understanding. Emotional intimacy is present when you can say something tender or uncertain and trust that it will not be used against you. It is present when your partner's picture of who you are continues to update as you continue to change, rather than freezing in time around the person you once were when you first met. It is present in the curiosity when your partner still genuinely wants to know you even more, rather than feeling that they've "got the gist" and knows enough about you. This emotional intimacy is a critical component to establishing a strong loving bond.

When emotional intimacy fades, the first sign is rarely conflict. It is something quieter and more subtle: a slow settling back into the parallel living dynamic described earlier, where two people coordinate a life together without actually sharing one. They know each other's schedules but not each other's worries. They can tell you what their partner ordered at dinner, but not what kept them awake at two in the morning.

The confusing thing about parallel living is how easily it disguises itself as stability and success. The relationship is functioning quite well. Since nobody is fighting, from the outside, everything looks fine. But inside it, one or both partners are carrying a particular kind of loneliness that is hard to justify to anyone, because nothing dramatic has happened.

They simply feel invisible to the person they share their life with, and that invisibility, sustained long enough, slowly erodes the conditions in which romance and desire can exist at all.

**That brings us to the second leg of the table: physical intimacy.** Yes, it includes sexual connection, but it is not limited to it. In fact, the non-sexual dimension of physical closeness is what couples most consistently underestimate. Physical intimacy is the hand resting briefly on a shoulder as you pass each other in the kitchen. The feet finding each other under the restaurant table. The hug that has no destination and no agenda, that simply says: I wanted to be near you. These are not small things. They are how couples speak to each other's nervous systems throughout an ordinary day, in a language that runs below words and below conscious thought.

In moments of touch, before your partner's mind has registered whether they feel wanted, their body has already received the message. Touch that is safe, present, and attentive communicates desire and care in a way that even the most carefully chosen words cannot replicate. When daily physical contact becomes less frequent (not because of any fight or decision, but because life got crowded and habit replaced intention), the nervous system registers the absence as a kind of distance, even when nothing else has changed. Over time, as the physical affection thins, something else starts to shift.

Suddenly, reaching toward each other starts to feel more burdensome than it used to. There may be feelings of risk in reaching for one another, where one questions whether the benefit is worth the reward. As time passes, touch eventually becomes more awkward than natural. That awkwardness is worth recognizing and naming, because that is the first step toward moving through it and shifting the dynamic toward renewed closeness.

**The third leg is play and shared joy, and it is the one that most couples abandon first and mourn last.** By the time couples come to me, they will mention the emotional distance and the physical disconnection. Rarely do they lead with the fact that they are in therapy because they have stopped laughing together. This is the farthest thing on their mind, and yet Dr. John Gottman's decades of research found that shared humor and the capacity to create genuinely pleasurable experiences together are among the most consistent predictors of a happy relationship. Playfulness is one of the mechanisms by which everything else works, and it cannot be ignored.

Think of it this way. When couples play together, defenses lower, the accumulated weight of countless adult obligations finds a release valve, and both people are reminded that they are not only each other's partners in responsibility, but each

other's source of genuine delight. This awareness releases stress, adds joy, and strengthens connection.

When all three legs of the tripod are steady, the structure holds. When one weakens, the entire tripod is at risk of toppling, even though the other two legs seem perfectly strong. The work of this book is to strengthen your relationship by reinforcing all three legs.

### **Sex: The Conversation Most Couples Avoid**

For many couples, sex is the dimension of their relationship they most want to improve, and yet, they most consistently sidestep. Wanting something and not knowing how to reach for it creates a quiet frustration that accumulates over time. Not only can it lead to frustration on the individual level, but not knowing how to safely discuss this topic as a couple can breed resentment toward one another.

Sexual connection carries a weight that other forms of intimacy do not, and that weight comes from a lifetime of confusing and mixed messages that one receives about sex. From carrying shame to ideas about body image, and from societal pressures to holding buried sexual traumas, all of that gets carried into the room when couples try to talk about sex, even when they do not say it out loud.

For those carrying histories that make physical intimacy genuinely complicated, experiences of past hurt, significant physical changes, or long-standing mismatches that have never been addressed, this book is not asking you to perform a version of intimacy that does not fit your reality. It is asking you to talk and listen in order to understand each other's reality more honestly. Try to bring the same curiosity and care to this dimension of your partnership that you would bring to anything else your partner carries that is difficult and important. The conversations in this book around sex are designed to be approached with safety, acceptance and care, so that healing of old wounds becomes a part of the conversational experience.

### **A Note on Aging and the Changing Body**

As we age, the body changes. This is a reality, not a crisis. But society wants us to believe it is a problem to run from. The couples who navigate it best are the ones willing to talk about it before it becomes a source of silent misunderstanding. Part of the natural lifecycle includes changes to the body physically, hormonally, and chemically. These shifts can sometimes happen gradually and sometimes quite suddenly. Yet, these changes affect libido, energy levels, comfort with self, and the overall intimate experience. These shifts rarely arrive on a

predictable schedule, and they almost never affect both partners at the same time or in the same way.

Without any blame, it is important to have a space to discuss the changes that happen and how it impacts the relationship. Again, no judgment, but with curiosity, care, and acceptance.

Without these conversations, one partner may be reading the changes as withdrawal of desire, diminished attraction, flat-out rejection, or as confirmation that this dimension of the relationship is simply closing. None of those interpretations is usually accurate. But in the absence of honest conversation, nothing exists to correct them. The misunderstanding compounds quietly until it has become a story both people are living inside of without having agreed to write it.

The couples I know who maintain satisfying physical relationships across decades are not the ones who were spared these changes. They are the ones who kept talking.

This topic shows the intersection between emotional and physical intimacy. For when one person is confronting and even grieving the physical changes within them, it presents an opportunity for their partner to lovingly support them through it. Absent that caring support, they may be filled with self-doubt or criticism. They may feel unwanted or unattractive, which may further magnify distance in the relationship.

What physical intimacy becomes in a long-term relationship, when it is tended honestly, is not what it was at the beginning. And that is to be expected. Physical intimacy is not linear; there will always be natural ebbs and flows. But the key is to ride the waves patiently and to communicate along the journey.

### **Why the Order of These Chapters Matters**

The three chapters of questions in this book follow a specific sequence, and the sequence is intentional.

Chapter four opens with discussing romance, intimacy, and building closeness. Before couples can move openly into conversations about sexual connection or shared adventure, they typically need to feel some genuine emotional safety with each other. Not perfect safety, not the absence of all tension, but enough of a felt sense that reaching toward the other person is likely to be received with care. Chapter four builds that foundation. Without it, the conversations in the chapters that follow can feel exposed rather than exploratory.

Chapter five moves into sexual connection, flirting, and physical touch. Having spent time rebuilding emotional closeness, couples are better positioned to approach this territory with curiosity rather than defensiveness. The chapter covers the full range of physical intimacy, from the daily

affection that keeps couples connected through an ordinary week to the more vulnerable conversations about desire, about what has changed, about what each person actually needs and has perhaps never said clearly. These are conversations many couples have been carrying quietly for a long time.

Finally, chapter six addresses play, fun, and adventure. This becomes the fuel in the relationship that keeps it going while a couple navigates life's ups and downs. It is what triggers the flow of dopamine and feelings of excitement from early on in the relationship.

Together, these three chapters offer a partnership where both people feel genuinely wanted, genuinely known, and genuinely glad to spend their time and their lives together.

### **Before You Begin**

Over many years of sitting with couples in various stages of disconnection, I have noticed something consistent about the ones who make the most meaningful progress. It is rarely the couples with the smallest problems or the most natural communication skills. It is the couples who choose, at some quiet turning point in the work, to bring genuine curiosity back into the room. To stop being certain they already know their partner's answer, and to put their own views aside long enough to become interested in what their partner thinks and feels.

Curiosity is not a personality trait. Many couples assume that either you are the kind of person who stays curious about your partner or you are not, and that if the curiosity has faded, something permanent has been lost. That is not what the research shows, and it is not what I have seen clinically. Curiosity is a mindset, and like most things that sustain a long-term relationship, it is a choice that can be made and remade. It is available to you right now, in this conversation, with this person you love.

The couples I think of most often, the ones who arrived in my office depleted and distant and left with something genuinely different between them, did not accomplish that through dramatic revelation or a single transformative session. They accomplished it by continuing to look at each other with interest, by taking down their own walls, and learning to ask questions – even those they assumed they already knew the answers to. That willingness, practiced steadily, is what reigniting the spark actually looks like from the inside.

**Igniting the spark is not a single magical moment, but a direction.** It is the repeated, incremental choosing of each other that changes the feeling in the relationship over time.

Reaching toward your partner, even when it feels uncertain, even when you are not sure the reach will land, is an act of courage as much as an act of love. Sure, there is risk in asking

to be held, suggesting a playful date, or being spontaneous in expressing a desire you have. Having these conversations in safe ways is what signals to the brain that the risk is worth the reward, as trust continually gets strengthened and connection deepened.

The pages ahead are your invitation to take that risk and reach for one another with curiosity, acceptance, and love.



# CHAPTER 4

## Romance, Intimacy & Building Closeness



“The best thing to hold onto in life is each other.”

— Audrey Hepburn

Being in a relationship does not mean that you'll automatically enjoy it. Some people incorrectly assume that simply by being married, they should somehow magically be happy. However, to really capture those exciting feelings of intimacy and romance, you need to truly show up, be present, express love, and nurture the friendship on a regular basis. Although these are the things that most people are never taught, this chapter explores how to build these muscles, so you can naturally spark the 'good feels' that everyone wants in a close relationship.

Keep in mind that intimacy shows up in many forms. There's emotional intimacy, when you open your heart and feel understood; intellectual intimacy, where you connect through ideas and perspectives; experiential intimacy, created through shared adventures; spiritual intimacy, where you explore meaning and purpose together; and physical intimacy, which includes affection, sensuality, and everyday touch. (Notice that I separated sexual intimacy, which should not be confused with physical closeness, as they are unique and each have their time and place). Together, all of these forms of connection create opportunities to feel close in different ways.

Some couples use the excitement of romance to get close enough to each other to start exploring the more vulnerable

space of intimacy. Others first establish the closeness of intimacy to build upon that safety and expand realms of romance and passion. It's not that one way is right and one is wrong. Rather these different styles suit different couples.

In the New York Times bestselling book, *The Normal Heart*, researchers looked at data from over 100,000 people to understand what is considered “normal” in terms of expressing love, romance, and intimacy. While the book is full of many fascinating revelations, perhaps what is most important is that there truly is no one version of “normal” that fits all couples. For example, when it comes to frequency of sex, there is no right or wrong amount that makes a couple “normal.” Similarly, when it comes to saying “I love you,” or amount of time you spend together, each couple is unique. Therefore, every healthy relationship deserves the space and permission to be different. When you work together, communicating effectively around what works for one another, you can then start to understand each other better, and bridge the gap when needed.

What makes intimacy special is that it doesn't happen alone. It grows in the liminal space between you. You may have different comfort levels with various types of closeness or different ways of expressing and receiving connection. Some people open up through deep conversation; others through

laughter, quiet time, or physical affection. None of these is more “right” than the others. What matters is discovering what forms of closeness you each value and how to navigate that dance on a daily basis. The key, therefore, is to communicate compassionately about your needs and expectations.

Many couples make the mistake to assume that romance thrives with big grand gestures. While most people tend to appreciate a special experience, at its core, romance is the practice of noticing your partner and reaching for them in small ways that makes them feel truly special, valued, and seen. It’s remembering how they like their coffee, offering a gentle touch in passing, or sharing a glance that says, “I still see you.”

**Romance isn’t about intensity. It’s about intentionality.** When you keep showing up with warmth, curiosity, and affection, it makes the other feel loved. And not just generically loved, but in the way that says, “you really know me.”

At the same time, there are many couples who truly love each other, but surprisingly, they don’t actually “like” each other. In other words, they would take a bullet for their partner, but if asked to go for a walk, or join them in the supermarket, they would run the other way. For love to thrive, however, it

needs expression and connection. Loving someone is not simply a feeling you carry, but actions that are expressed in words and deeds; aimed at making the other person feel seen, special and cherished – both loved and liked.

The questions in this chapter invite you to explore how intimacy, romance, and friendship show up in your relationship. What helps you feel seen, safe, desired, and understood? These conversations create space for those deeper feelings of love to find their way to the surface. As you have these conversations, try your best to be calm, open, safe, and trusting, to allow for the deepest of conversations to flow and connect the two of you.



# THE FOUNDATION OF ROMANCE



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- Can you help me understand your definition of romance? What does romance look like for you?

2

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- What feelings does romance bring you? How do you experience it?

3

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- When do you feel most loved and cherished in our relationship? What specific actions or moments create that feeling of being truly valued?

4

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- What's the most meaningful way I express love that resonates deeply with you? Can you try to paint a picture of how it makes you feel?

## 5

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- How do you experience the difference between feeling loved and feeling romanced? When might you crave one more than the other?

## 6

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- What makes you feel emotionally safe enough to be fully present during romantic moments? What conditions make your walls go up or come down?

## 7

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- What factors may inform whether you're interested in romance? What puts you more in the mood?

## 8

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- Do you need romance to help you feel more secure and intimate, or is a sense of security a prerequisite for you to engage in romance? Can you explain?

## ROMANTIC HISTORY & EVOLUTION



9

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- What's the most memorable romantic gesture I've ever done for you? Why did it stand out, and what did it mean to you at that time in our relationship?

10

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- Can you share a picture-perfect romantic moment of ours that you truly cherish? Are there any elements you'd love to recreate?

11

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- As our relationship has evolved, has romance become a more important factor for us, or less significant? Why?

## 12

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- Has your definition of what you consider romantic changed from the beginning of our relationship until now? What new preferences have emerged as our relationship has deepened?

## 13

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- Is there a specific aspect of our early courtship that you cherish fondly? How might we recapture it in our current stage of life?

## 14

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- What feelings do you remember about the very first time we touched? What about our first kiss?

## 15

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- Can you recall a time when you were going through a rough patch and I did something simple for you which you found to be deeply meaningful or romantic?

## 16

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- How do you interpret the shifts in our romantic relationship over time? Do you see it as us getting stronger as a couple or weaker? Can you explain?

## 17

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- What romantic gesture, no matter how small, never fails to touch your heart when I do it? What makes it particularly meaningful?

## 18

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- What's one conversation we had long ago that sparked a feeling of deep romantic connection? Why has this particular exchange stayed with you?

## 19

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- Are there any photographs, keepsakes, or other physical reminders that tell a special story about our romantic history? What feelings do those items evoke for you?

## 20

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- Do you carry any heavy or traumatic experiences related to romance from our relationship or a previous one? How might this still impact you?

## 21

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- How might we create romantic moments that acknowledge and celebrate our history while still feeling fresh and exciting?

## **EXPRESSIONS OF LOVE & ROMANCE**



## 22

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- What kind of effort or exertion does it take for you to shift into a romantic headspace or to plan romance in our relationship? Are there things I can do to make it easier?

## 23

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- What romantic gesture would feel especially meaningful in this current chapter of our relationship? Why would it resonate now?

## 24

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- How does feeling truly seen and understood by me affect your sense of romantic connection? What specific things make you feel most deeply recognized?

## 25

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- What kind of words or phrases make you feel most loved and appreciated? Is there something specific you'd like to hear more often?

## 26

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- What's your ideal balance between grand romantic gestures versus small daily expressions of love? How do these different approaches affect you?

## 27

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- Can you share an example of a grand romantic gesture that you would really enjoy and why?

## 28

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- What are some smaller day-to-day things that I can do to spark more romance for you? How would these things make you feel?

## 29

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- Can you recall a moment when I responded to your vulnerability in a way that deepened our romantic connection? What was that like?

## 30

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- Are there any acts of service that I do - like helping out around the house - that make you feel closer to me? Can you describe how it feels for you?

## 31

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- How does your love language (acts of service, words of affirmation, quality time, physical touch, or gifts) influence what feels most romantic to you?

32

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- When have you felt most emotionally understood in our relationship? What was happening, and how did that understanding make you feel?

33

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- What romantic gesture have I done that felt more significant than I probably realized? Why did it affect you so deeply?

34

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- Which of our established rituals or traditions began spontaneously and evolved into something meaningful? What's the story of how it became important to us?

## **EMOTIONAL INTIMACY & CONNECTION**



35

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- When do you feel most emotionally open and connected with me? What circumstances or actions help create that openness?

## 36

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- What kind of emotional support from me helps you feel most romantically connected? How is this different from the help I might offer on a daily basis?

## 37

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- Think about a moment when our connection felt particularly meaningful beyond just pleasure. What was happening in our lives at that time, and what made that connection feel so significant?

## 38

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- How does romance feel for you when you are stressed and overwhelmed by daily life? How can we better approach this together as a team?

## 39

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- How do you experience the balance between verbal and non-verbal expressions of love? Which tends to speak more deeply to you?

40

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- What helps you mentally and emotionally transition from daily responsibilities to romantic connection? What makes this shift easier?

41

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- Can you remember a time when we successfully shifted from a stressful period to feeling deeply connected? What specifically helped us make that transition together?

42

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- What have you learned about yourself through our romantic connection that might have taken longer to discover otherwise?

## **ROMANCE THROUGH DIFFERENT LIFE PHASES**



43

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- How might we keep romance alive during challenging life transitions? How does it feel to think about romance dying because we are juggling too much?

## 44

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- How do you feel about adapting our romantic expressions to accommodate aging, changes in health, energy, or physical capabilities? Can you think of any examples of these shifts?

## 45

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- What kind of romantic things can I do that would help you feel both the security of our established bond as well as the excitement of continued discovery?

## 46

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- What's a romantic experience you hope we'll share in a future phase of our relationship? What makes this vision appealing?

## 47

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- How has your capacity for giving or receiving romance evolved through personal growth or healing? What changes have you noticed?

48

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- Can you recall a time when you were trying to be romantic, but I was not receiving it? How did it feel? Does it cause you to think twice before initiating?

49

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- Have you ever pushed yourself out of your own comfort zone to explore something romantic with me? How did it feel? Were you glad or did you regret it?

## **ROMANTIC ATMOSPHERE & SENSORY CONNECTION**



50

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- When you picture romance, do you see us going out for something romantic, or do you picture it as an intimate evening together at home? Which environment speaks more to you?

## 51

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- What elements (lighting, music, scents, textures) most help you transition into a romantic mindset with me? Which specific sensory detail has the strongest effect?

## 52

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- When we've had especially romantic evenings, what specific memories or details stand out as elevated beyond our everyday interactions?

## 53

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- What time of day do you naturally feel most romantically connected, and how might we design more moments around this natural rhythm?

## 54

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- Is there a particular place we've been together that sparked an unexpected romantic connection? What was it about that environment that awakened something between us?

## 55

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- What scents, colognes, perfumes, or fragrances trigger romantic or intimate feelings for you? Can you help me understand what it feels like when a scent of mine tickles you?

## 56

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- What music or sounds create the most romantic atmosphere for you, and does this change depending on your mood or the occasion?

## 57

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- What subtle changes to our home environment would most enhance its potential for romantic connection? What element feels most important to you?

## 58

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- How do seasonal changes affect your preferences for romantic settings or activities? What specific qualities of each season inspire romance for you?

## 59

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- Can you remember a time when we transformed an ordinary space into something romantic? What simple elements made that transformation possible?

## 60

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- How does slowing down and bringing mindful attention to sensory experiences change your feeling of connection during romantic moments? Do you notice a change in your heart rate or breathing? How does it feel in your body?

## 61

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- How does eye contact affect your experience of intimacy and connection? What kind of gaze feels most connecting? When does eye contact feel uncomfortable?

## THE ART OF FLIRTATION & DESIRE



62

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- What specific kind of flirtatious gesture or comment from me never fails to make you smile, no matter how many times I do it?

63

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- When in our relationship history have you felt most desirable or wanted? What specific things did I do or say that created that feeling for you? How could I make you feel that way again?

64

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- How do you prefer to be flirted with differently in public versus private settings? What makes each context special or exciting?

## 65

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- What's a way I've flirted with you in the past that you'd love me to revisit or do more often? What made it particularly effective?

## 66

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- How does anticipation and buildup throughout the day affect your experience of romance and connection later? What form of anticipation works best?

## 67

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- Think of a time my flirtation caught you completely by surprise and delighted you. What made it work so well in that moment?

## 68

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- What subtle forms of touch or non-verbal cues feel most flirtatious to you without being overtly sexual? How do these small gestures affect you?

69

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- What words or phrases feel particularly romantic or flirtatious when I say them to you? Is it the content, the tone, or something else that creates the impact?

70

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- What could I say or do earlier in the day that would create a sense of exciting anticipation for connection later?

71

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- How do you feel about a whisper in your ear, a sensual gentle touch, or intimate eye contact? What effect do these things have on your body?

## **PHYSICAL INTIMACY & TOUCH**



72

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- What form of non-sexual touch most helps you feel connected and present with me? What quality makes it especially meaningful?

## 73

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- How do different qualities of touch (firm/soft, quick/lingering, expected/surprising) affect your experience of connection?

## 74

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- What physical gestures or touch help you transition from feeling distant or separate to feeling connected and close?

## 75

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- How does dancing or moving together to music affect your sense of connection and physical attunement? Is this something you would like to do more frequently?

## 76

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- Do you think we make enough time for kissing each day? How would kissing more often enhance our connection? Would we like to prioritize kissing more often?

## 77

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- What do you feel when we slow down to embrace each other for a long hug? What goes through your mind when our arms are wrapped around each other?

## 78

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- When have you felt most comfortable in your own body with me? What elements created that feeling of freedom and ease?

## 79

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- What's a form of physical connection beyond sex that we don't share often enough that you'd like more of?

## 80

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- Remember a time when a simple touch between us communicated something words couldn't express. What was happening, and what was conveyed? How can we reclaim more of it again?

## PLAYFULNESS & ADVENTURE



81

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- What kind of playful interaction always seems to break the ice or lighten the mood between us, even after a challenging day?

82

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- What's a recent example of playfulness that helped us reconnect when we were feeling distant? How did that shift the energy between us?

83

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- How does incorporating elements of play and humor affect your experience of intimacy and connection? When does this work best?

## 84

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- Remember a time when we completely surprised each other with our spontaneity, silliness, or playfulness. What stands out about that experience?

## 85

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- Can you think of a playful challenge or adventure you'd like us to try together that might add excitement to our relationship?

## 86

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- Do we have an inside joke between us that creates a feeling of special connection that's just for us? What makes it meaningful?

## 87

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- What role does humor play in taking our walls down or reducing tensions between us? What kind of humor always puts a smile on your face?

## ROMANTIC RITUALS & TRADITIONS



88

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- How do you feel about going on a weekly date together? What types of activities would you enjoy? How can we make this more of a regular habit?

89

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- Do you have expectations for birthdays or anniversaries to include romance? Do you view it as an opportunity or more of an obligation? What does it mean to you?

90

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- How can we do a better job reconnecting at the end of the day so that our days end with more connection and intimacy?

## 91

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- Is there a romantic vacation that you would like us to plan together? What elements should it definitely include?

## 92

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- What is our go-to restaurant that we both enjoy as a romantic spot? What do you like about it? Do you have any favorite memories there?

## 93

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- How do you feel about using creative activities (like art, music, dance, or writing) to serve as a unique form of romantic connection? What would you be most open to trying and why?

## 94

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- What unconventional or unexpected setting could we transform into a romantic opportunity? What might that look like?

## SENSUALITY BEYOND SEXUALITY



95

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- Can you remember a time when we shared a deeply sensual (but non-sexual) experience together? What were the circumstances, and why has that memory stayed with you?

96

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- What sensual experiences create the strongest feelings of connection for you? How do these sensual moments feel differently than sexual connection?

97

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- Thinking about sensory experiences such as food, drink, touch, etc., how do they enhance your feeling of being fully present in your body during romantic moments? Can you recall any specific examples?

## 98

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- Are you a big cuddler? What does cuddling do for you? Do you have a favorite cuddling position, and why?

## 99

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- Can you help me understand when you are more inclined to cuddle versus when you might want more space?

## 100

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- What sensual experience or pleasures would you still like to experience together? What about it excites you?

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### AFTER THE CONVERSATION

There is something that tends to happen in this chapter that I want to name before you move on, because it matters and because couples sometimes do not recognize it for what it is.

At some point in these conversations, one of you likely said something about how you experience romance or closeness that the other person did not fully know. It may have been something small, something you would not have predicted would land the way it did. But if you were paying attention, you probably felt a slight shift in the room when it happened, a moment of unexpected recognition, of seeing your partner freshly in a way that the ordinary pace of life rarely permits.

**That is emotional intimacy doing exactly what it is supposed to do.** What I observe in couples who sustain genuine romance over time is not that they have solved the problem of romance or found a formula that keeps it reliable.

It is that they have stayed curious about each other, even after years of familiarity, even when the curiosity required some effort to activate. **Curiosity is the engine underneath romance**, and without it, even the most thoughtful gestures eventually start to feel hollow, because they are being offered to a version of your partner that you stopped updating a long time ago. When you actually know what your partner needs right now, in this season of your relationship, and you reach toward that with intentionality and warmth, romance stops being a performance and becomes something closer to a practice.

The questions in this chapter were designed to help you update your understanding of each other in exactly that way. Not to produce a list of romantic preferences to file away, but to create the experience of being genuinely seen and genuinely curious, together, in the same room at the same time. That experience is not a means to an end. It is itself a form of intimacy.

I also want to acknowledge that not every conversation in this chapter felt easy or rewarding. For some couples, certain questions opened territory that carried some discomfort: a mismatch in how each person defines romance, a moment when one partner shared a need that the other had not been meeting, or a realization that something once present in the relationship has been missing for longer than either person had consciously admitted. If that happened for you, I want to say

directly that this discomfort is not a problem with your relationship. It is actually the chapter working as it was intended. Discovering a gap between what your partner needs and what you have been offering is not a verdict. It is the beginning of a more honest and more connected way of being together, and the fact that you are both still in the room having this conversation at all is itself significant. That is where you keep nurturing the curiosity to learn about each other and how to bridge the gap that will help maintain connection.

As you reflect on what emerged from these conversations, try not to lead with your reaction, but rather notice what surprised you. Notice what moved you. Notice where you discovered a gap between what you thought your partner needed and what they actually said, and approach that gap, not with guilt or defensiveness but with the same curiosity you would bring to something genuinely worth understanding. The couples who remain genuinely romantic over decades are not the ones who get it right every time. They are the ones who keep caring enough to ask. As was discussed in Volume 1 on foundations, every relationship builds an evolving “Love Map” that holds the key to understanding one another. By maintaining curiosity, it allows you to continually and lovingly update that map and stay truly connected.

## WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

*As you reflect on the conversations from this chapter, explore the following questions together:*

1. What did I learn about how my partner experiences romance or closeness that I genuinely did not understand before these conversations, and how does knowing this change the way I want to show up for them?

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2. Was there a moment in these conversations when I felt unexpectedly seen or understood by my partner? What was happening, and what did it reveal about what I actually need in order to feel close?

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3. When I think about the ways I typically express love and affection, am I expressing what I feel, or what I believe my partner should want? Where might there be a gap between the two?

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4. How do each of us experience the difference between feeling loved and feeling desired, and are there times when we each need one more than the other without knowing how to say so?

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5. Were there any moments in this chapter where one of us shared something very vulnerable about our experience of romance or intimacy? How was that vulnerability received, and what would it mean to protect and honor it going forward?

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6. What is one specific thing my partner said in these conversations that I want to remember and act on, not because I feel obligated to, but because it genuinely helps me understand how to reach them?

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7. If I am honest with myself, what conditions make it hardest for me to be present and open to romance, and have I ever explained this to my partner in a way that actually landed?

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8. What would it look like for both of us to feel consistently cherished in this relationship, not in grand or extraordinary moments, but in the ordinary texture of an average week?

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## CHAPTER 5

# Sexual Connection, Flirting & Physical Touch



*“The most important sexual organ is the brain.”*

— Dr. Ruth Westheimer

Physical connection is its own kind of language in relationships. Without saying a word, it can communicate desire, comfort, playfulness, safety, trust, and care. This chapter explores how touch shows up between you, from casual affection to sexual intimacy, and how it shapes your bond.

Dr. Gottman's research consistently demonstrated that couples who can talk openly about their sexual life report higher levels of satisfaction in the bedroom. Yet for many couples, these conversations are some of the hardest to have. They can bring up shame, vulnerability, fear of rejection, judgment, cultural pressures, or past wounds.

We don't all arrive at adulthood with the same understanding of physical closeness. You and your partner likely had very different experiences growing up. Whether in how your families expressed affection, what messages you received about sexuality, or what was modeled for you in terms of desire, boundaries, and self-worth, each of you is bringing something different to the table.

For one partner, physical touch might have been common and comforting; for the other, it may have been rare or even confusing. These differences aren't mistakes. They're just part of your hardwiring and the individual stories you bring to the relationship.

**What is important to note is that sexual connection rarely begins in the bedroom.** It starts much earlier in your story, and perhaps even before you ever met. Researchers often describe this as your “sexual ecosystem,” which includes multiple factors that inform how your brain relates to sex. This can trace back to your childhood, earlier experiences in adolescence, or present-day experiences in your relationship. Thus, when one person offers a flirtatious glance across the kitchen, a spontaneous hug, playful touch, or loving text message, it may stir something much deeper inside of you. At the end of the day, feeling desired and connected usually has less to do with sex itself and more to do with emotional safety, trust, and attunement.

Sex educator and author Dr. Emily Nagoski likens our inner sexual workings to a gas pedal and brake in a car. This dual control model suggests that some moments in a relationship will cause one person to hit the gas, accelerating the sexual encounter with passion, while other moments will trigger a person to slam on the brakes and quickly extinguish any sexual energy. This is a natural and normal part of how our internal parts, the brain and body, work together.

The questions in this chapter are designed to help you explore your unique sexual dynamic, and to learn what circumstances enable you to both press on the gas together.

At the same time, it is essential to understand when added safety might be needed and how to respond if one person hits the brakes while the other is revved up. These conversations will help you safely discuss your fantasies, desires, needs, and curiosities and how you can build a sexual relationship that feels mutually nourishing.

As you talk through this chapter, remember that sharing about sex can feel especially tender. Offer each other grace and acceptance, free of any judgment. You don't need all the answers today. What matters is creating a space where it feels safe to explore, ask, and be honest. When you can talk about your physical relationship with curiosity and compassion, you deepen the intimacy that makes your whole relationship stronger.

## EARLY SEXUAL UNDERSTANDING & HISTORY



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- Do you remember the first time you learned about sex? What were some of your early memories and reactions?

102

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- When you were growing up, what was it like to discuss sex in your home? Were these topics openly discussed, whispered about, or completely avoided? How did this impact you?

103

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- Did your parents have "the talk" with you? Were you able to ask them questions about sex? Was one parent more open than the other?

## 104

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- Can you recall a moment in your youth when you felt shame or confusion about something related to your body or sexuality? How has that experience influenced you over time?

## 105

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- What religious or spiritual messages about sex were you exposed to growing up? How have those shaped your feelings about intimacy, and which have you kept or discarded?

## 106

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- Who was the most positive influence in helping you develop a healthy understanding of sexuality? What did they do or say that was particularly helpful?

## 107

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- What would you have wanted to know sooner about sex and intimacy that might have helped you navigate your journey more confidently? How might that have changed things for you?

## 108

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- If you've experienced negative sexual experiences in the past, how comfortable do you feel sharing these with me? What would help create safety for you to share this?

## 109

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- How have past difficult or traumatic experiences affected your relationship with your body, pleasure, or intimate connection? How can I be most sensitive and supportive of these wounds?

## 110

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- Are there specific triggers or responses from past experiences that still arise during intimacy? How might I best support you in case these triggers surface?

## 111

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- If you could talk to your younger self about sexuality and intimate relationships, what wisdom would you most want to share? What misconceptions would you want to correct?

## FLIRTATION & BUILDING DESIRE



112

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- What forms of casual touch throughout the day build anticipation for you? Is there a specific touch you remember that stayed with you long after?

113

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- What kinds of flirting from me make you feel most desired? Can you share an example that really worked for you and why it resonated so deeply?

114

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- How do you like to be looked at when I'm attracted to you? What makes my gaze feel desirous versus uncomfortable or objectifying?

## 115

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- What playful names do you enjoy in private moments? How do different tones change how these names make you feel?

## 116

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- What kinds of messages during the day make you feel desired? Would you enjoy more of this kind of communication, and what style works best?

## 117

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- What playful dynamics create an erotic charge for you? Is there a playful interaction we've had that you'd enjoy exploring further?

## 118

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- Can you describe a time when you were very turned on by me? What was it that excited you?

## INITIATING & RESPONDING



119

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- How comfortable do you feel initiating intimacy?  
What makes this easier or more difficult for you?

120

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- How do you prefer to let me know when you're in the mood? Would you like to develop some playful signals or code word between us?

121

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- When you initiate sex, what kind of responses from me make you feel good? Are there any that should be avoided?

122

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- Have I ever missed signals you've tried to send to me that you were in the mood for sex? How did that feel? How could I be more attentive?

123

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- When you initiate intimacy and I'm not in the mood, how does that feel? Is there a way I can respond that helps you still feel loved and close?

124

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- How can we create an environment where "not tonight" doesn't create distance? What could that look like in practice so that we still maintain close connection?

## **SETTING BOUNDARIES & COMMUNICATION**



125

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- How comfortable do you feel setting boundaries around intimacy? What makes this easier or harder for you?

## 126

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- Can you share any history around boundary-setting that might make it more challenging for you to vocalize your boundaries?

## 127

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- How can we create an environment where expressing limits feels as welcome as expressing desires?

## 128

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- Does sex ever feel physically painful for you? How comfortable are you telling me when it hurts, or do you tend to hide it? How can we create more safety as a couple?

## 129

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- How comfortable do you feel redirecting or asking for a break during intimate moments? What response would help you feel secure in changing course?

130

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If we ever have to stop in the middle of sex for whatever reason, how would that leave you feeling? How can we still maintain a close feeling of connection?

**DISCUSSING DESIRES  
& EXPLORING FANTASIES**



131

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How do you feel about discussing sex? Is there a history behind this feeling?

132

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Are you comfortable describing your sexual desires and preferences? What would make this easier?

## 133

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- What fantasy have you been curious to explore but haven't mentioned? What's held you back from sharing it?

## 134

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- How comfortable do you feel discussing fantasies that are just for imagination versus those you'd actually want to try? What would make these conversations easier?

## 135

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- What's a desire you've discovered recently that you'd like to explore further? How did you become aware of this interest?

## 136

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- Looking back on our most satisfying encounters, what elements stand out as particularly memorable? What made those moments special?

137

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- What elements of surprise enhance your experience versus which ones feel unsettling? Can you share an example of each?

138

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- How do you feel about exploring power dynamics or role-play in the bedroom? What aspects intrigue or concern you about this territory? How can we always ensure physical and emotional safety while experimenting with new things?

## **TOUCH BEYOND SEX**



139

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- How do you feel about massage or cuddling that doesn't go any further? Do you generally hope or expect that it will lead to sex?

## 140

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- What types of massage do you most enjoy? Is this an area you would like to explore more of together?

## 141

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- What sensual scenario have you imagined that doesn't necessarily involve sex but creates anticipation or pleasure?

## 142

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- How comfortable are you asking to be touched or guiding me in a specific kind of touch? Is there anything I can do that would make it more comfortable for you to express your desires?

## 143

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- What forms of everyday physical affection help you feel connected without creating pressure for sex? What forms of touch can I do more of for you?

144

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- Which parts of your body do you enjoy having touched in non-sexual but intimate ways? What kind of touch feels most soothing?

145

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- What kinds of touch help you feel cared for when you're stressed or sad? Can you share a memory when touch was particularly comforting?

**YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT  
SEX TOYS & PORNOGRAPHY**



146

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- What are your thoughts on pornography, either individually or together? How do you feel it impacts a couple sexually?

## 147

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- If you ever engage in adult content, what elements or scenarios tend to appeal to you? Is there something specific you would be curious to explore with me?

## 148

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- What are your thoughts about self-pleasure with or without pornography?

## 149

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- How do you feel about self-pleasure when we are together as a couple?

## 150

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- How do you feel about the use of toys and accessories in the bedroom? Is there anything specific you enjoy or would like to try?

151

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- Do you have any personal toys that you would be interested in using together?

152

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- Under what circumstances do you feel more adventurous or comfortable experimenting with new things in the bedroom?

153

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- How does the idea of roleplay make you feel? Do you have any fantasies that involve outfits or dressing up? Is there something specific you might want to try together?

**PHYSICAL PLEASURE &  
SPECIFIC TURN-ONS**



154

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- Can you think of a few examples of things that I do which turn you on or put you in the mood?

## 155

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- What specific touches or techniques consistently bring you the most pleasure? How comfortable would you be guiding me so that I can maximize the pleasure I give you?

## 156

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- Do you believe that sex should always end with both people having an orgasm? Do you prefer it happen simultaneously or taking turns?

## 157

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- Which of your erogenous zones respond most intensely to different types of touch: light teasing, firm pressure, or rhythmic movement?

## 158

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- What are your thoughts or preferences when it comes to oral pleasure? Are there any do's or don'ts that would help us both feel more confident and connected?

## 159

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- What approaches to oral pleasure feel most satisfying for you? Are there specific techniques or patterns that you would particularly enjoy?

## 160

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- How do different positions affect your pleasure during intercourse? Which positions, angles, or depths create the most pleasure or intense sensations for you?

## 161

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- What pace and rhythm typically work best for you during different stages of arousal? How do you like the progression to unfold?

## 162

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- What sounds or words during intimacy enhance your arousal? Are there specific things you love hearing me say that intensify your pleasure?

163

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- What specific part of your body would you like me to pay more attention to that I might have overlooked? How would you like to be touched?

**LOCATIONS & SETTINGS  
FOR INTIMACY**



164

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- Beyond the bedroom, what locations in our home have you fantasized about being intimate in? What makes these spaces appealing?

165

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- Do shower or bath experiences appeal to you? What specific activities or positions work best in these wet environments?

166

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- Have you ever fantasized about intimate encounters in semi-public or outdoor settings? What aspects create excitement versus anxiety?

167

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- What travel destinations or vacation settings have you imagined would create especially memorable intimate experiences? What excites you about them?

168

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- What makes a hotel room or unfamiliar space either particularly exciting or challenging for intimate connection?

169

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- Is there a place we've been together where you secretly wished we could have been intimate? What made that location appealing?

**BODY CONFIDENCE  
& APPRECIATION**



170

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- Which parts of your body do you enjoy having touched or simply admired? Are there areas you wish received more appreciation (or perhaps less)?

## 171

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- What helps you feel beautiful and desirable, especially during times of insecurity? What makes a positive difference?

## 172

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- How do you prefer I respond if you express insecurity about your body? What feels supportive versus dismissive?

## 173

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- What kinds of compliments feel most meaningful to you? Are there words that resonate more deeply than others?

## 174

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- How does lighting affect your comfort with your body during intimate moments? What creates the best environment for your comfort?

175

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- What parts of your body have you learned to appreciate more over time? What journey have you taken with accepting your physical self?

176

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- How do you feel about being looked at during intimate moments? What makes this comfortable versus uncomfortable?

**TURN-ONS &  
TURN-OFFS**



177

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- What specific actions, words, or scenarios reliably turn you on, even when you weren't initially in the mood?

## 178

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- What subtle cues or behaviors from me signal desire in a way that you find particularly arousing?

## 179

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- What immediately dampens your arousal or takes you out of the moment? How would you prefer I respond if I notice this happening?

## 180

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- When it comes to kissing, do you have any likes or dislikes? How do you feel about incorporating more kissing into our lovemaking?

## 181

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- How would you feel if I were to approach you with bad breath or body odor? Is there a way we can handle it compassionately without being hurtful?

## 182

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- What scents, tastes, or sensory experiences enhance your arousal? Are there specific products worth exploring?

## 183

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- What attitudes or qualities in a lover do you find most enticing? When have you felt most drawn to me sexually and why?

## 184

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- What's your comfort level with sexy talk or storytelling during intimacy? Are there things you'd enjoy hearing (or saying) that might turn you on more?

## 185

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- What are your feelings about how the use of lubricant or condoms affects the sexual experience?

## SENSUALITY & AWARENESS



186

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- What sensory details do you notice most during intimate encounters: textures, scents, sounds, visuals, or tastes? How can we incorporate them into our sex life?

187

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- How comfortable are you with eye contact during intimate moments? What quality of connection does this create for you?

188

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- How do you feel surrendering control in the bedroom, such as a blindfold or being safely tied up? Is this something you would be curious to explore together?

## 189

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- When have you felt most intensely present in your body during intimacy? What conditions created that heightened awareness?

## 190

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- How do different states of mind (relaxed, excited, playful, intense) affect your physical sensitivity and response?

## 191

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- What meditative or mindfulness practices have you found that enhance your ability to be present during intimate experiences?

## 192

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- How does focusing on giving versus receiving affect your experience of pleasure and connection? Which comes more naturally to you?

## SEXUAL EVOLUTION & GROWTH



193

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- What sexual myths or misconceptions did you once believe that you've since outgrown? How did this evolution happen?

194

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- How have your preferences and desires changed through different life stages? What patterns have you noticed?

195

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- What's something about your sexuality that you understand now that you wish you'd known earlier? How would this knowledge have helped?

## 196

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- How has our sexual connection evolved since we first became intimate? What growth or changes have you appreciated most?

## 197

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- What aspects of your sexuality would you like to explore or develop further? What might help you in this exploration?

## 198

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- How has emotional growth or healing in other areas of life affected your sexual expression or comfort? What connections have you noticed?

## 199

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- Do you value more quality or quantity of sex? Would you rather have regular quickie sex or occasional mind-blowing sex? Why?



How do you balance familiar, reliable pleasure with novelty and exploration? When do you have a preference for one over the other?

## **CHAPTER FIVE: AFTER THE CONVERSATION**

For many people, conversations about physical and sexual intimacy carry a particular kind of weight. Not just vulnerability, which is present throughout this book, but something closer to feeling exposed. Because the sexual dimension of a relationship is so often the place where people carry their deepest uncertainties about themselves: are they desired? Are they enough? Are they attractive? Are they accepted? These are not easy doubts to hold, and they are even harder to say out loud to the person whose opinion of you matters most.

If you made it through this chapter, something important happened, regardless of how far the conversations actually went or how complete they felt. You created a space in which

this territory was at least partially possible to enter together. That is not nothing.

For many couples, it is the most meaningful breakthrough in the entire book, not because of what was said, but because of the courage and willingness to begin saying it.

What I find, working with couples over many years, is that the sexual disconnection most long-term partners describe is rarely about desire having disappeared. It is almost always about the conditions surrounding desire having quietly deteriorated: the emotional safety, the daily warmth, the feeling of being genuinely wanted outside the bedroom, and the accumulated weight of moments when one person reached toward the other and the response was indifferent or dismissive, even when it was not intended that way. If a busy couple has a handful of moments that felt rejecting, it will slowly start to build walls that create distance. Over time desire feels lost and does not know what to do or where to go.

What these conversations can begin to restore is exactly that environment, not through any single exchange, but through the cumulative experience of being honest with each other about something that has been living in silence.

I also want to acknowledge that some parts of this chapter may have been harder than others. Perhaps one of you shared something about your history or your experience that was tender and unfamiliar to your partner. Perhaps a question surfaced a mismatch in desire or in expectations that had been quietly sitting between you for some time. Perhaps there was a moment when one of you wanted to go further in the conversation and the other needed to stop, and navigating that felt uncomfortable. All of these experiences are normal, and all of them contain information that is worth holding carefully. The goal of this chapter was never to resolve every complexity in your physical relationship in a single sitting. It was to begin the kind of honest, ongoing conversation that makes resolution possible over time.

Silence about physical intimacy does not protect a relationship. It actually starts to create feelings of shame, distance and confusion, making it much harder to bridge the gap and come back together. What you did by entering this chapter at all, even imperfectly, even partially, is the opposite of silence. It is the beginning of a different kind of conversation between you. That beginning has great value to strengthening the safety and connection in your relationship, which helps ignite and sustain that spark.

## WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

*As you reflect on the conversations from this chapter, explore the following questions together:*

1. What did I discover about my partner's experience of physical intimacy or desire that corrects something I had been assuming, perhaps for a long time, without ever directly checking?

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2. Were there moments in these conversations where I felt the instinct to protect myself, either by pulling back, deflecting, or keeping my answer cautious? What was underneath that instinct, and what might it be telling me about what I need in order to feel more open?

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3. How does each of us experience the emotional conditions that make physical intimacy feel genuinely wanted rather than obligatory, and are those conditions present often enough in our relationship right now?

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4. Is there something I have been wanting to share about my experience of our physical relationship that I have not yet found the words for, or the right moment to say? What would it take for that conversation to feel safe?

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5. How do we feel now when it comes to discussing our sex life? In what way have these conversations changed our comfort levels?

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6. What does physical connection mean to each of us beyond sex, and are we giving enough attention to the daily acts of non-sexual affection that keep the physical channel open between us throughout an ordinary week?

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7. If we could bring more intention and awareness to one aspect of our physical relationship, not to fix something broken but to honor something that matters, what would that be?

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8. What would it mean for both of us to feel genuinely met in the physical dimension of this relationship, and have we ever actually said that to each other in specific enough terms to act on?

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# CHAPTER 6

## Sparking Fun, Play & Adventure



*“We didn’t realize we were making memories;  
we just knew we were having fun.”*

— Winnie the Pooh (A.A. Milne)

Remember how it felt at the beginning of your relationship? That spark of excitement when you were discovering each other, trying new restaurants, staying up late talking, planning weekend getaways, or spontaneous adventures.

Then life happens. Work deadlines pile up, family responsibilities expand, and financial pressures mount. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the fun and adventure that once came so naturally begin to fade into the background. That is when date nights become rare, laughter becomes less frequent, and new experiences get postponed for “someday.”

Research consistently shows that couples who maintain a shared sense of fun, play, and adventure, even modest ones, report significantly higher satisfaction and emotional closeness over time.

The beauty of fun and adventure is that they reconnect you to the lighter side of life and, at the same time, to each other. They create breathing room from responsibilities. They remind you that you’re not just co-managers of a household or co-parents, but two people who genuinely enjoy each other’s company.

Although what counts as “adventure” varies widely from couple to couple, the specific activity matters less than the shared experience of stepping outside your comfort zones and discovering new dimensions of yourselves and each

other. Even just talking about adventure is part of the process, as it stirs excitement and opens up possibilities.

The questions in this chapter help you identify what experiences spark excitement and how you might weave more adventure and playfulness into your relationship. They invite you to recall what once brought you joy and to imagine new possibilities that reflect who you are now as you continue to progress through life.

One important caveat: many couples find themselves sparking excitement when they explore ideas for creating an adventure, only to quickly extinguish it by focusing on the logistical obstacles. Suddenly, that exciting vacation feels unrealistic or out of reach. This is where you must keep in mind as you discuss these prompts, that it is not about the logistics or feasibility, but about sharing, having fun, and planting seeds. Whether or not the adventure becomes a reality is less important than the connection that results from the conversations themselves. In Volume 5 of *Couples Conversations™*, there are hundreds of other questions that discuss building and living out your dreams. This chapter focuses on transforming the present into more exciting moments.

In a world that often rewards productivity over pleasure and multitasking over being present, making time for fun

together is more important than ever. It is always easy to argue that we are just too busy for fun. However, the memories you create, the laughter you share, and the stories you collect become treasures that continue to nourish your connection long after the adventure ends.

## REFLECTING ON PAST ADVENTURES



201

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- What's the most memorable adventure we've shared together? What specific moments from that experience stand out most vividly for you?

202

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- Can you share an activity or hobby from childhood that you did together with a parent or relative which you still really enjoy today? How would it feel for us to try it together?

203

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- Can you recall an unplanned detour that unexpectedly altered our plans and led us to one of our best memories? What made that spontaneity work so well?

## 204

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- What's the hardest we've ever laughed together? What triggered that moment, and why do you think it connected us so deeply?

## 205

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- When you look back at our photo library or memories together, which adventure or fun experience do you look at most fondly? What emotions does it evoke?

## 206

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- When looking through our photos together, what feelings come up about the adventures we've shared? How would you feel about creating a photo book or video montage to celebrate those moments?

## 207

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- What adventure or playful moment during the first year of our relationship revealed something about our compatibility? How did it influence your feelings about us?

208

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- Thinking back to some of our fun adventures, which types create the most lasting positive effects on your mood and our connection? How can I be more supportive of making these happen more often?

## **ADVENTURE PLANNING**



209

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- How important is having regular fun and adventure in maintaining your happiness in our relationship? What frequency feels ideal to you?

210

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- Does the thought of planning an adventure together lead you to feelings of stress or excitement? Why?

211

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- How do you feel about impromptu day trips or weekend getaways? What elements would make them feel special to you?

212

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- What major adventure feels most achievable for us to plan in the next 12-18 months? What would make it most meaningful?

213

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- If we could wake up anywhere in the world tomorrow, where would you want it to be and what would we do first?

214

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- What's the most adventurous thing you'd try if you knew I'd be right there supporting you through it? How would my company make a difference?

## **TOGETHER AT HOME**



215

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- If we were to binge-watch a show together, what genre would you choose? Would you prefer to watch one episode after another, or space them out?

## 216

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- What do you think about watching a stand-up comedian or funny blooper videos together? How does it feel when we both laugh uncontrollably?

## 217

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- When do you feel most lighthearted and carefree around me? What specific circumstances create that feeling?

## 218

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- What might a connecting date look like at home when neither of us has any energy left in the tank?

## 219

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- Is there a home-improvement project that you feel up for trying together? What would it be and why?

## 220

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- If we jointly tackle a home-improvement project, how might it strengthen our relationship? In what ways might it challenge us? What can we do to stay connected?

## 221

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- What technology-free evening activity would create genuine connection? How do you think disconnecting from devices affects our interaction quality?

## 222

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- What is something we do that leads us to laugh uncontrollably together? How would you feel doing that more often?

## 223

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- What playful side of yourself do you rarely show others that you'd like to express more with me? How can I help you open that side up more?

224

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- What are some ordinary moments at home that have unexpectedly turned into the most fun? What made them special?

225

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- How would you feel about learning to make cocktails together at home for a date night? What would you enjoy about it?

## LEARNING & DISCOVERY



226

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- What new skill or hobby would you enjoy learning together where we'd both be complete beginners?

227

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- What creative pursuit (art, music, cooking, writing) would you like us to explore together? What about it interests you?

## 228

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- How do you feel about trying something that you know we would be terrible at doing initially? What might you want to try?

## 229

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- What local class, workshop, or experience have you been curious about that we could try together?

## 230

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- Do I have any interests, talents, or hobbies that you would be curious to learn about? Which ones and why?

## 231

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- What's something you've always wanted to master, like juggling, dancing, or a musical instrument? How would you feel about pursuing it seriously?

232

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- How would you feel about taking a cooking class together or trying to create and cook a fun menu at home? What might you want to cook, and why?

233

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- How would you feel about an adventure around animals, such as a petting zoo, goat yoga, or puppy farm? What aspects excite you or freak you out?

## **CREATING OUR OWN FUN TRADITIONS**



234

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- Is there a phrase or saying that we have adopted that has become a unique part of our rituals whenever we engage in certain fun activities? If not, what phrase can we coin together?

235

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- What childhood experience brought you joy that you'd like to reinvent for our relationship?

236

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- What holiday or celebration would you enjoy reimagining with our own fun twist? What elements would make it special?

237

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- What ordinary achievement or milestone deserves its own silly celebration dance, song, or ritual? What might that look like for us?

238

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- What anniversary or meaningful date on the calendar could benefit from adding our own playful twist rather than a conventional celebration? What might that look like?

## **TRAVEL EXPERIENCES**



239

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- What travel experience would make you feel most connected to me? Why?

## 240

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- What type of trip brings out the best in you: beach relaxation, city exploration, wilderness adventure, or something else? How does it make you feel?

## 241

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- What local area have we never properly explored that you're curious about? What's stopped us from visiting? How can we make it a reality?

## 242

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- What's the most incredible place you've ever visited? What elements made it special that we could seek elsewhere?

## 243

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- What travel memory from your past would you like to recreate or reimagine with me as your companion? What might you do differently this time?

244

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- How do you feel about amusement parks? What do you love or hate about them? What aspects would you be most excited to experience together as a couple?

## **BEING SILLY AND CREATIVE**



245

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- How do you feel about us carving out a time to be silly and ridiculous, such as dressing up as a character, building a fort, adopting an accent, etc.?

246

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- What themed experience (like a decade, culture, or movie) would be fun to immerse ourselves in for a day and why?

247

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- What's a fictional world or scenario you'd enjoy roleplaying or recreating elements of together?

248

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- How could we use storytelling to create, record, or document a part of our own story that we wish to capture and possibly share with others?

249

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- What silly or childlike activity would bring you genuine joy to do together, regardless of how ridiculous it might look to others?

## PHYSICAL PLAY & MOVEMENT



250

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- What type of physical activity makes you feel most joyful and uninhibited? Is it something we've done together before? What elements create that feeling of freedom for you?

251

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- What outdoor adventure appeals to you that we haven't tried yet? What's holding us back from experiencing it together?

## 252

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- How do you feel about dancing together? Does the setting matter, like at home versus in public? What would make it more comfortable and enjoyable for you?

## 253

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- If we were to join a recreational sports league or physical activity class together, which might you be open to trying? How do you think it might affect our dynamic as a couple?

## 254

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- What water experience, whether swimming, kayaking, snorkeling, paddle-boarding, or something else, brings you a sense of excitement? Is this something you'd like us to experience more regularly?

## 255

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- What hiking trail or natural area have you been wanting to explore? What would be your ideal way to experience it together?

256

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- When have you experienced the rush of taking on something physically challenging where you pushed yourself hard? How did it feel?

## SENSORY ADVENTURES



257

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- Is there a restaurant or food experience you've been curious to try but haven't yet? What interests you about it? How would it feel to experience it alone versus together?

258

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- What concert, music festival, or live performance would create a memorable experience for us? What would you look forward to most about attending it together?

259

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- Is there a specific sensory environment (like a botanical garden, sound bath, or art installation) that you would be curious to experience together?

## 260

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- How do you feel about blind taste tests or sampling wine, chocolate, or coffee? Would exploring these flavors together appeal to you as a date activity?

## 261

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- What hands-on creative experience (like pottery, glassblowing, photography, or cooking) would you enjoy trying together? What appeals to you about this particular activity?

## 262

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- What scenic drive or train journey would you love for us to experience? How do you imagine we'd spend our time during the journey?

## 263

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- Would you enjoy a sensory-focused date night, like a blindfolded dinner, massage exchange, or aromatherapy experience? What aspects would make it both fun and connecting?

264

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- What role does alcohol play in having a fun time together? What is the right balance for us?

**STAYCATIONS &  
LOCAL EXPLORATION**



265

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- Can you think of a date night that would not cost any money and create fun memories together?

266

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- Would you be open to creating a local scavenger hunt for each other? What might you enjoy about it?

267

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- Is there a nearby town or neighborhood we've never properly explored? What would be your approach: planned stops or completely spontaneous wandering and why?

## 268

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- What local landmark, museum, or historical site have we overlooked that might offer an interesting afternoon together? What specifically interests you about it?

## 269

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- What rooftop view, sunrise spot, or unique vantage point in our area would you like to experience together? What time of day would make it most special?

## 270

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- What local food tour, brewery trail, or culinary experience might create both discovery and enjoyment for us? How do shared tasting experiences affect our connection?

## 271

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- What seasonal event or festival in our community have we never attended that might actually be fun to try together? What are some aspects you'd enjoy?

272

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- How would you feel about us taking weekly dance lessons together? Which style (like salsa, swing, or tango) sounds most fun to try and why?

273

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- If we could grab a bottle of wine and take two glasses anywhere in town, where would you like to go and why?

**SURPRISE  
ELEMENTS & SPONTANEITY**



274

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- If I told you to pack a lunch or an overnight bag for a special adventure with no prior warning, would that excite you or stress you out? Why?

275

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- What's your idea of a perfect surprise date from start to finish? What elements would make you feel both excited and comfortable?

276

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- When has a spontaneous decision led to one of your favorite memories with someone? What made that unplanned moment so special?

277

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- How would you feel about creating "mystery date" envelopes for each other that we could open when we need inspiration? What parameters would make this fun rather than anxiety-producing?

278

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- What spontaneous adventures would you love for us to try together? What specifically excites you about these ideas?

## **SHARED CHALLENGES & GAMES**



279

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- What game or activity brings out your competitive side in a way that's actually fun for both of us? How do you like to celebrate your victories?

## 280

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- Do you prefer competing alongside each other or against one another? Can you think of an example of when we have done each?

## 281

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- What kind of dates, games, or activities tend to encourage us to work successfully as a team? How does that affect our relationship?

## 282

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- How would you feel if we created a "bucket list" of activities and challenges that we post on the refrigerator for us to tackle? What three items would you want to include?

## 283

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- What friendly competition or challenge between us has led to the most laughter? What made it fun rather than stressful?

284

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- How do you feel about board games versus active games? Which specific games create the most enjoyable dynamic between us?

285

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- Is there a board game from your childhood that you once loved and would be up for playing together with me?

286

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- Do you ever hold back when you're winning a game against me? What goes through your mind when you see me struggling or losing during a competitive moment between us?

## **NATURE & OUTDOOR CONNECTIONS**



287

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- How do you feel about us going camping together? What elements would you dread and which would you be excited about?

## 288

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- Can you think of a nature setting that consistently improves your mood and energy? Is there a specific memory you have of when it was particularly helpful? What does this setting do for you?

## 289

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- Can you think of any activities that you enjoy, which are specific to the changing seasons?

## 290

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- What stargazing spot, sunrise view, or natural phenomenon would create a memorable experience for us? What would make it worth any inconvenience of timing or travel?

## 291

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- What simple outdoor ritual (like morning coffee while watching the sunrise or evening walks at sunset) would you enjoy establishing together? How might this small practice affect our connection?

292

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- How would you feel sitting outdoors together, reading quietly side by side? What would you appreciate about it?

## FUN ACTIVITIES TOGETHER



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- How would you feel going on a thrilling roller coaster together? What kind of rides do you enjoy most?

294

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- Are there any special memories from childhood of going to a park that you would like to recreate with me?

295

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- How would you feel about going ice skating or roller skating together, and why?

## 296

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- What would you like or dislike about doing an escape room together, and why? What would make it even more fun?

## 297

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- Would you enjoy going bowling together? How might it feel if we made some playful wagers that the loser would owe the winner? What kind of bets might you want to make?

## 298

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- How would you feel playing miniature golf together? Would you be up for going to a driving range or even playing 18 holes of golf together?

## 299

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- How do you feel about going to an arcade? What kind of games would we play together that would make it most fun?



What do you like about table games like ping-pong, pool, or air hockey? How would you like to create a tournament between us? What prize should the winner receive?

## **CHAPTER SIX:**

### **AFTER THE CONVERSATION**

Completing this chapter represents a particular milestone. It captures a specific genre of conversation that most couples never have. You sat down and intentionally talked about fun. You named what excites each of you. You revisited adventures you had forgotten you wanted, and you let yourselves dream a little out loud about what could be possible. Now comes the harder part, which is not the talking. It is transforming those conversations into reality.

Here is what I see clinically, again and again. Couples can have a wonderful conversation about dates, play, adventure, and travel. They light up around the possibilities, agree that they want more of it, but when it comes to implementation, it stalls. They often return to the same routines by the following week. Not because they did not mean what they said, but because life rushes back in. The work calendar

fills up. The kids need something. The energy that was there during the conversation gets quietly absorbed by the demands of life, and adventure slides back to the bottom of the list.

That gap between the conversation and the action is where most couples lose the spark, even after they have figured out what they want. The conversation is the easy part. Protecting the time, defending it from everything else that wants to steal it, and actually following through is where the real work begins.

So as you close this chapter, the question is not whether you talked about fun. You did. The question is what you are going to do with it. What is the one thing that came up in these conversations that you are going to actually put on the calendar this week? Not next month. Not when things settle down. This week. Because if you wait for things to settle down, you will be waiting forever, as the spark you are trying to reignite is waiting too.

Perhaps start with something small. Even if you are tired, or distracted with life's demands, being intentional and committing to fun has an amazing way to bring energy back into the relationship. So, you might start off exhausted, but somehow it creates energy when you need it most.

The couples who succeed at this are not the ones who schedule the ambitious adventures. They are the ones who built in small, consistent moments of fun, and then put in extra effort to protect these moments,

so that nothing gets in the way. It could be something as simple as a walk together in the evening with no phones or trying a new restaurant once a month. While they are small things, the results can be tremendous, as they are the building blocks of a relationship that feels alive.

## WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

*As you reflect on the conversations from this chapter, explore the following questions together:*

1. What did I discover about what genuinely energizes or delights my partner that I had underestimated or stopped paying attention to, and how might knowing this change how I think about planning time together?

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2. When did we last do something together purely for the pleasure of it, and what does our honest answer to that question tell us about our relationship?

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3. Were there moments in these conversations where we laughed or felt unexpectedly lighthearted together? What created that feeling, and what would it mean to build more of those conditions into our regular life rather than waiting for them to arrive on their own?

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4. Where do our definitions of fun and adventure genuinely overlap, and where do they differ? How have we been handling those differences, and is there a more curious or generous way we could approach them?

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5. Are there adventures, experiences, or traditions that came up in this chapter that we have been meaning to do for a long time? What has actually been stopping us, and is that reason still as valid as it once felt?

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6. How much room does genuine playfulness currently have in our relationship, not as a special occasion but as an ordinary feature of how we exist together, and what would it actually take to expand that room in a sustainable way?

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7. Were there any parts of this chapter that brought up feelings of accomplishment or disappointment? Can you share those?

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8. What is one concrete, specific thing, small or large, that we are going to actually do together in the next month because this chapter reminded us how much we want to?

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As a couples therapist, I am deeply moved by the couples I work with on a daily basis. I consider it a sacred honor to sit with them in their raw and vulnerable pain, longings, disappointments, frustrations, hopes, dreams, and most importantly, their victories. I have the greatest respect for those couples who take these critical steps toward strengthening their love and connection.

Therefore, it is with great humility that I thank you and every couple who walks this journey of growth and healing. Whether you are a newly minted couple or a veteran relationship, the simple act of choosing to invest time in your future speaks volumes about what matters to you. Not every couple has the insight to prioritize their connection or the courage to explore it more deeply. By making this choice, you're already taking a significant step toward strengthening the kind of rich, resilient partnership that withstands life's challenges and grows more fulfilling over time.

The quality of your relationship affects virtually every aspect of your life: your health, your happiness, your finances, even your sense of belonging in the world. Therefore, by nurturing this core connection and investing in your relationship, you're creating ripple effects that enhance your overall well-being and even spread positive influence to those around you.

For me, this is a journey, both personally and professionally, that I could not have taken without the loving support of my incredible wife and family, all of whom have made sacrifices to support my passions,

nurture my talents, and enable me to make a difference every day in the lives of the couples I see. As this line of work is private and confidential, I don't often get the opportunity to share the fruits of my labor with my family. Yet, every now and then, someone will stop us on the street and introduce themselves to my wife as a client whose marriage I helped save. In my obsessive nature to protect confidentiality, I just smile and say thank you. But in those moments, I can see the gratification in my wife's eyes, as if her support and sacrifice is truly making a difference, one couple at a time. There is no way for me to begin to say thank you, but I dedicate this book series and all my achievements to her.

I am also profoundly grateful to my mentors, supervisors, trainers, and colleagues, all of whom have challenged me to dig deeper, work harder, and push myself in ways I never imagined. Additionally, I am eternally grateful to my coworkers, friends, and professors at Yeshiva University's Wurzweiler School of Social Work, who fundamentally shaped my professional persona as a social worker, researcher, and professor. Perhaps, though, it is my incredible students who truly inspire me most with their own commitment to shining their own light into this darkened world.

Finally, I cannot begin to envision where I would be without the incredible guidance of Drs. John and Julie Gottman and the Gottman Institute, whose research and training have completely shaped my understanding of how to help couples through a sophisticated scientific lens. Their decades of hard work have literally reshaped the landscape of relationships and couples therapy, and I pray that their life's work will continue to illuminate the hearts of couples and therapists around the world.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Ari Sytner is a licensed clinical social worker, researcher, author, and internationally recognized expert in relationships. With more than two decades of experience working with individuals and couples, he is known for his compassionate, accepting, and insightful approach to helping all people heal, grow, and thrive, both individually and relationally.

As a couples therapist, Dr. Sytner specializes in guiding partners through the complexities of communication, trust, intimacy, and repair. Drawing from evidence-based methods, including the Gottman Method of Couples Therapy, EFT (Emotionally Focused Therapy), and Attachment Theory, he brings both clinical precision and human warmth to his work, incorporating a compassionate lens of trauma-informed perspective.

In addition to his clinical practice, Dr. Sytner is a respected educator and mentor, serving on the faculty at Yeshiva University's Wurzweiler Graduate School of Social Work, where he teaches and trains the next generation of social workers. He is also a sought-after speaker, blending science, storytelling, and soulful wisdom to inspire healthier relationships at every stage of

life. He is the author of *The Kidney Donor's Journey* and *The Ultimate Relationships Workbook for Couples*.

Dr. Sytner is a proud father, husband, rabbi, and kidney donor. This book and the entire *Couples Conversations™* series are an extension of his commitment to bringing more love, compassion, connection, and kindness into the world.

To contact Dr. Sytner, schedule a session or speaking engagement, please visit: [\*\*www.asytner.com\*\*](http://www.asytner.com)

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