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IF THIS IS LOVE, WHY DO I FEEL SO INSECURE?

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Names and identifying features of the people in our cases have been disguised to protect the confidentiality of these persons.

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If This Is Love, Why Do I Feel So Insecure?

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ARCHIE BRODSKY

"Deals with a fascinating and compelling topic: insecure love, which combines obsessiveness with anxiety—the kind of love in *Fatal Attraction* . . . Skillful blending of case histories with scientific research." —Steven Duck, Ph.D.
Editor of *The Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*

It doesn't have to hurt to be in love, yet for many otherwise accomplished and confident people, romantic involvement means anxiety, insecurity, and pain.

The result of the largest and most comprehensive study on this subject ever conducted, ***If This Is Love, Why Do I Feel So Insecure?*** unearths the causes, effects, and cures for obsessive romantic attachments-and how they prevent romantic fulfillment. Discover how to:

- Recognize and diagnose the symptoms of insecure love
- Cope with the uncertainties of being with a fickle lover
- Overcome your obsession with your lover, your longing to see him/her every day, and your jealousy when your lover spends time with others
- Examine your parents' relationship to determine how it influenced your later experiences of romantic love
- Choose partners who won't make you feel insecure

Filled with true-life stories and dramatic case histories, this provocative and authoritative sourcebook will set you on a path of greater self-understanding—and increase the possibilities of finding an enduring love.

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WHY PASSION TURNS TO PAIN:

THE RIDDLE OF INSECURE LOVE

Elaine, a thirty-six-year-old ballet dancer, began therapy after an emotionally draining episode. After fifteen years of an amiable, childless marriage, she had fallen in love with her mentor, a prominent choreographer. Although she knew little of Peter outside of their artistic and professional activities, in her mind their shared dedication to dance became a romantic bond. She often dreamed about Peter; she thought of him every time she began to dance, and eventually as she lay awake at night after silent, perfunctory lovemaking with her husband, Steve.

For quite a long time she said nothing to Peter, until finally she wrote him a long, unrestrained letter weaving together her love of dance with her love for him. When she saw him next, Peter, a quiet, formal man, reacted with discomfort. He complimented her work and expressed pleasure in their professional relationship, but disclaimed any romantic interest in her. One remark he made stuck in her mind. "This doesn't seem to have much to do with me," he said.

Elaine was shaken by this remark. For several weeks she agonized over how she had made a fool of herself. He was right—this didn't have much to do with him. How could it? She didn't even know him well enough to say anything really personal to him in her letter, much less talk about being soul-mates. Painful as it was, Elaine had to admit that her letter was not so much a message to another person as a transcript of a private obsession.

This insight led her to think back to the other men she had approached during the past several years, for this was not the first time she had lost her head this way. There had been other infatuations, other letters, other anguished declarations, and other rebuffs. Elaine was an attractive, intelligent woman, yet all these men had rejected her—some at the outset; others after a one-night affair. Now Peter, her mentor in this as in other areas, had told her why. Her letters and impassioned pleas, so full of longing, of suppressed energy, *weren't at all about the recipients.* All too plainly, they expressed her own needs outside the context of an actual relationship. Her desires were too intense and her demands too great for these men to handle comfortably.

A thoughtful, self-conscious person, Elaine found this a troubling insight. What made her act so "crazy"? She had a decent home life; she didn't need to go out looking for a relationship. Why did these intense feelings arise? What were they about? What needs was she seeking to satisfy?

Since her feelings about ballet had figured so strongly in her romantic attraction to Peter, she began to explore with her therapist what ballet meant to her. As a child Elaine had worked hard to free herself from her domineering mother and to get closer to her cold and distant father. Elaine's mother apparently had preferred that her husband be alienated from the children, so that he could not interfere with her influence over them. Elaine could barely remember spending any time alone with her father. From her earliest years, the one thing that had won Elaine her parents' unqualified approval (though not affection) was her dancing. Still, despite her parents' penchant for displaying her as a prodigy, dance had become for Elaine a deeply personal refuge, the one outlet she had for expressing feelings safely. She danced to please not only her parents, but herself.

Soon after her arrival on the state college campus, she met Steve, a man with whom she remained continuously involved; upon graduation they were married. Elaine had struggled hard to break away from her family and go off to school, and her independence was still tentative and uncertain. Steve seemed self-assured and talked a confident line, not so much about conquering the world as insulating himself from it in spiritual self-sufficiency. He, too, had a distant father and an overwhelming mother, and this similarity of backgrounds may have contributed to the compatibility he and Elaine felt with each other. However, Steve's style, like his father's, was to set limits, erect barriers, and stay at arm's length—a tendency Elaine found increasingly frustrating as the years went on.

The overriding social and cultural preoccupations of college life in the late 1960s could obscure large differences in personal preferences and temperaments. Indeed, Elaine and Steve had less in common than they thought at the time. She a serious performing artist, he a philosophy major headed for a professorship, they thought themselves the perfect match. Actually, though, Steve used philosophy to tame life and distance himself emotionally, while Elaine danced with self-absorbed reverence.

By the time Elaine entered therapy, she was actively discontented with her marriage. Most of her complaints centered on Steve's emotional unavailability. "He's a good husband, but there's nothing to grab on to. He's not very affectionate physically. I love him, but I don't feel connected to him. It's like we're running on parallel tracks." Feeling blocked in her intimate life, Elaine had poured herself more and more into artistic performance. It was as if she were dancing again and again the steps that had made her feel valued and appreciated as a child.

Her therapist told her, "Sometimes the things people complain about in their spouses are things they don't really wish to change. People choose complaints they can live with, even if they don't like them. If they didn't have those complaints, they wouldn't know what to do next—and they might get really frightened. Ideally, you might want Steve to be different, but then you might have to change yourself to meet him on different ground." It appeared that Elaine had set herself up with an impassive man, like her father, whose defensive shell she needed to break through, while Steve had set himself up with an emotionally demanding woman like his mother to fend off. Marriage had liberated Elaine from the impasse of being unable to get close to her father for fear of rejection by her mother, yet it simultaneously had welcomed her back into a familiar prison of emotional neglect.

Had she wanted simply to gain the affection she felt she had been denied, she might well have obtained it either in or outside of marriage. Instead, she re-created (both in her marriage and in her attempts at love affairs) the struggle for acceptance that had been so frustrating for her as a child and that she had never resolved. It was as if what she found rewarding was reliving the struggle itself, rather than reaching the goal. In adulthood as in childhood, dance was both her magic potion to beguile others and her magic carpet of escape. Her fantasy about Peter, her admired colleague and teacher, was so seductive because Peter personified her unconscious belief that love could be won through performance. For a time after he spurned her advances she

worried that he would stop teaching and advising her; this unfounded fear stemmed from interpreting her failure to win his affection as equivalent to being panned by critics after a performance.

Had she been able to form an intimate relationship with Peter, the lifelong association Elaine had drawn between acceptance-as-approval and acceptance-as-affection would have been put to the test. The outcome likely would have been more deeply disorienting than fulfilling. But in reality Elaine did not run that risk, since she declared her love in a way that assured that Peter would not reciprocate. She wouldn't have known what to do if he had reciprocated, for she unconsciously assumed that he would reject her. Rejection put her in the familiar—and, in that sense, less threatening—position of worrying about whether he would even teach or work with her again. One day she made a grand appeal for love; the next day she felt compelled to salvage any scrap of attention, as she had with her father.

As she began to understand the kinds of choices she had been making all her life, Elaine was better able to separate her marriage from the fantasies that had surrounded it. From week to week she wavered between wanting a divorce and resolving to work on her marriage. Her therapist suggested that she take steps in both directions simultaneously, in order to test out how it might feel to go down either path. He encouraged her to speak with an attorney about what getting a divorce would entail, and at the same time to be more assertive with her husband and clearer about her needs. She had, after all, been stuck in inaction for years. If she experienced her marriage as a charade, it was not only because Steve was not emotionally present, but also because she had let his withdrawal from her go unchallenged. Instead of testing the limits of their relationship, she had played by its implicit rules (in which she, too, had invested) while simultaneously imagining herself living with Peter as his wife and lover, dance partner and protégée.

Perhaps she should not take for granted that Steve did not want intimacy, or was incapable of expressing it. Perhaps he wanted closeness, but was afraid to initiate it. He, too, might have painted himself into a corner by settling into rigid, limiting roles with her. When two people have been making love silently for fifteen years, it can be hard for either to break out of the pattern and be as uninhibited in their marriage as they might be in a new love affair. Could Elaine and Steve still transform their marriage? Although it was not Elaine's job to make her husband over, she could at least take responsibility for her end of the relationship and try to bring out Steve's capacity for expressing affection by expressing the affection she still felt for him.

Her first effort to communicate more deeply with Steve was tentative. Hesitantly, she ventured that she was struggling to find meaning in her life. Steve easily assimilated this into his philosophical framework, and a discussion of the meaning of life ensued. If she didn't go far enough the first time, she went perhaps too far the second time, when she blurted out, "I'm thinking of leaving you." This revelation was more precipitous than her therapist had advised; he would have preferred to see her build up to it. It was understandable, however, that a woman who was used to escaping into romantic fantasies rather than asserting herself, even about household matters, would have difficulty moderating weightier communications. For a few years Elaine had wanted to have their house repainted, but she had not said so to Steve. She had not mastered the middle ground between silent compliance and angry defiance.

Despite these rough edges in communication, Elaine was impressed with the vigor and tenacity with which Steve reacted. He proved surprisingly willing to do whatever was needed to save their marriage. Thus, her initiative opened up serious discussion between them in many previously untouched areas. Still, the outcome remained in doubt. "I don't know if I really want to work on the marriage, or if I'm doing it out of guilt," she said. "The feeling may be gone by now." Her mood and his shifted from day to day between optimism and pessimism, giddy excitement at the possibility of recapturing their youthful romance and resignation that it was not to be. Elaine felt better when she assumed a share of control. As she asserted herself more both in and out of the marriage (for example, by discussing divorce procedures with a lawyer), she felt less trapped, and more comfortable remaining married by choice. But when she felt that Steve was reasserting control, she wanted to leave him.

Steve wanted Elaine to commit herself to the marriage prior to working out the issues. He mobilized friends and relatives to prevail on her to stay. It seemed as if he was uncomfortable with the uncertainty she had introduced and wanted to restore the predictability of their relationship. He did not understand that the more he struggled to do so, the more he risked losing her. She wondered whether, once reassured of her loyalty, he would simply revert to his old ways. For herself, she would reserve judgment and would explore both paths—marriage and divorce—until she was reasonably sure that she was making the right choice.

Elaine's embarrassing romantic fantasy about Peter had revealed an insecurity that had many roots—in her background, in her husband's, in their

relationship, and in other aspects of her life. No one answer could explain it all, and no one solution could set things right. But there were explanations, and there might be solutions. With this acknowledgment of complexity, and of hopeful possibilities as well, we will examine the experience (the symptoms, the feelings, the varieties, the causes, and the cures) of insecure love.

This book is based on the first major research project about insecure romantic love. This subject has been talked and written about a great deal in recent years: the desperate longing that many people feel for an intimate connection, the repeated and often futile efforts to find that connection, the emotional turmoil and the jealousy that occur along the way, and the painful experience of depression that may follow. What we have not seen previously are reliable explanations about how and why this happens: what early experiences contribute to creating a person who is prone to insecure romantic love, and what other personality traits this person is likely to display.

Six centuries before Christ, the Greeks called it *theia mania,* meaning "the madness from the gods." The poet Sappho described this condition as an overwhelming desire to be in a loved one's presence, to make physical contact, to be approved of and cared for, to possess and be fulfilled by another. *Theia mania* had symptoms familiar to us today: agitation, sleeplessness, fever, loss of appetite, and heartache. The Roman poet Ovid wrote *The Art of Love,* a literary version of today's comprehensive guide to wooing and winning the person of your dreams. In a final chapter, entitled "The Remedies for Love," Ovid advised:

> So now listen to me, young people who have been so deluded,
> Whom, for all of your pains, love has completely betrayed,
> I have taught you to love—
> Do you want to know how to recover?

Almost two thousand years later, the word *mania* has returned to the literature in the words of sociologist John Lee, who described the manic lover as "consumed by thoughts of the beloved," with an "insatiable" need for attention and affection. Lee noted that "the slightest lack of enthusiasm from the partner brings anxiety and pain; each tiny sign of warmth brings instant relief, but no lasting satisfaction."

Our notion of insecure love is similar to what Dorothy Tennov, in her book

Love and Limerence, labeled *limerence*—that is, a state of continually or repeatedly being "in love" as opposed to loving. To define the look and feel of this insecure love, we have borrowed from the literature of psychoanalysis and other branches of psychology as well as poetry, music, and drama, and focused on the following experiences:

- the unrealistic pursuit of a glamorous, elusive love object, one who keeps you perpetually up in the air or treats you with downright cruelty or disdain
- the sensation of having "fallen in love at first sight"
- the goose bumps of nervous arousal you feel in the presence of—or just thinking about—your beloved
- the obsessive preoccupation with the romantic infatuation, to the exclusion of work, school, family, friends
- the belief that all your happiness—indeed, your whole life—is wrapped up in whether this one person returns your affections
- the wish to live on an island of emotional isolation with your partner, with neither of you having emotional ties (or even much contact) with anyone else
- the continual demands for confirmation of love as, never satiated, you plead for ever more evidence of the devotion you feel is your due
- the agony and ecstasy of roller-coaster mood swings as your partner fails to meet your demands for consistent affection or avoids that ultimate commitment
- the feeling that your passion is all the more intense when you are least sure it is being reciprocated.

Tennov described these sensations, feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, but did not measure them. We have sought to capture them on a questionnaire that begins the next chapter. Some related experiences fill out the picture of insecure love:

- the insane jealousy that rages within you regardless of whether your partner is actually unfaithful
- the agonizing, cataclysmic, and often vindictive breakup
- the depressed aftermath, when you feel empty, devastated, as if the core of your being has been taken away.

Extreme jealousy, which becomes increasingly intense as the relationship unravels, and depression after the relationship ends are part of the course of insecure love and will be discussed in later chapters.

"Love hurts," sang the Everly Brothers, like many others before and since. But why does it hurt some of us more than others? What leads some of us to search for love in a self-defeating way that sets us up to be hurt again and again? What makes otherwise accomplished, confident people anxious, fearful, and insecure in their romantic involvements? Do they repeatedly choose the wrong people to fall in love with? If so, why? Do childhood experiences hold the key? Most important, what are some realistic steps we can take to do something about the problem? Can understanding lead to change and growth?

To answer these questions, we (psychologists Carl Hindy and Conrad Schwarz) conducted a nearly decade-long research project at the University of Connecticut. In the first stage of the study, 360 students in their freshman year (half women and half men) answered an exhaustive set of questionnaires (six to eight hours' worth) about their personalities and family backgrounds, as well as their dating habits, sexual experience, sexual fantasies, and alcohol and drug use. In addition, each student's parents, a sister or brother, and a college roommate or best friend filled out questionnaires concerning their observations of the student and the student's family. All family respondents contributed their perspectives on such issues as the mother's and the father's child-rearing styles, the parents' marital adjustment, and the degree to which either parent exerted a dominant influence over the child. The student and the sister or brother also rated the closeness of the student's relationship with each parent, and the two parents rated their own and each other's personalities. This in-depth survey provided a very full picture of a young person's life, seen from a number of different angles. It is a picture of how personality develops, how a person comes to be what he or she is, in a context of family relationships.

A few years later, when they were finishing college or had recently graduated, most of the same research participants filled out questionnaires about each of the four romantic relationships they considered most important in their lives thus far. For each relationship they answered thirty-three questions (reprinted at the beginning of the next chapter) about the experience of insecure love, or "anxious romantic attachment." Other questions included how long the relationship lasted, whether or not it was exclusive (i.e., monogamous), how intensely the partners felt about each other, and how much time they spent together. Each participant was asked to rate his or

her romantic partners on certain key characteristics (for example, physical attractiveness, trustworthiness, and emotional consistency). Additional questionnaires explored how intensely she or he experienced a wide range of emotions in the course of each relationship, as well as jealousy toward the partner and depression after the relationship ended.

Altogether, nearly 1750 people spent about 7500 hours taking a number of well-established, reliable psychological tests. Counting several related studies, the total number of participants was close to 2500. From this large-scale study of the romantic involvements of young men and women, we believe we have learned some useful facts about how people's backgrounds and life histories lead them to form strong romantic attachments in anxious, insecure ways. We will share our findings here for what they may contribute to self-awareness and personal growth.

We were especially encouraged to find that if you look at enough information about a person, you can discern more clearly the person's temperament and consistent patterns of behavior. That is why we had family members and friends fill out questionnaires. It is also why we asked people to answer questions about four relationships rather than just one. People's lives make sense if you look at them from enough angles. If a person filled out a questionnaire about one love affair, we might just learn about an extreme situation in that person's life, a relationship that was unusually passionate or frustrating. But by asking about four relationships, we could average out a person's answers and get a better idea of what that person's romantic involvements typically were like.

In this way we identified people who were especially prone to insecurity in their love relationships and others who were not. We also identified certain kinds of childhood experiences that appear to put a person more at risk for insecure love relationships later on. Finally, we identified tangible, observable characteristics of insecure relationships. All of this information can help you determine whether a relationship that you are or were involved in might be characterized as insecure.

Starting with the test at the beginning of the next chapter, you will be able to answer many of the same questions about your relationships that our study participants answered. You can also give these questionnaires to your partner, or else answer them about your partner as well as yourself, to get a sense of what the experience is like on both sides. In addition, throughout the book the formal research findings are supplemented by fictionalized vignettes based on clinical experience as well as interviews with people who wanted to

share their experiences. By interweaving these clinical and personal accounts with our data, we will paint a composite portrait of the person troubled by insecure love.

The experience of insecure love, which we also refer to as anxious romantic attachment, has two main components. One is *anxiety.* This is the "he loves me, he loves me not" sensation of being kept constantly on edge by a fickle lover. Anxious lovers feel as volatile as the stock market—up one day, down the next. Their passion rages all the more intensely when they are least sure that it is reciprocated.

The second component of insecure love is *obsession* with the loved one. Love at first sight, longing to see the loved one every day, wanting to go off and live on a deserted island together—these are signs of a romantic obsession. To the obsessed lover, the possibility of rejection feels like the end of the world.

A person who experiences romantic insecurity tends to be both anxious and obsessed. For such a person, love is a tempestuous experience, involving a range of emotions: on the one hand, excitement, joy, and sexual arousal; on the other, distress, fear, shame, anger, contempt, and disgust. Everyone feels these emotions sometimes, but the person who is insecure in love feels them especially intensely and often goes quickly from one extreme to the other.

You may recognize some of these feelings from your own (or a friend's or lover's) experience. You may recognize, too, some other signs of insecure romantic love: dating many different people, falling in love (and declaring love) frequently, feeling love more quickly and more intensely than one's partner does; and, sadly, having one's love go unrequited.

There is another side to insecure love. Some people always seem to be between relationships. They tend to pass up the highs of romance in order to avoid risking the lows of rejection. While this *detachment* looks very different from anxiety, it may in fact be closely related. Those who avoid romantic involvements may be anxious, too—so much so that they prefer not to expose themselves to experiences that might arouse their anxiety.

A person's *choice of partners* also reveals something about the kinds of relationships the person seeks. People tend to be obsessed when they find their partners particularly attractive. They tend to be anxious when they find their partners inconsistent in their behavior. You can, of course, look at the cause-and-effect relationships from either or both directions. An inconsistent partner can make you feel anxious; conversely, feelings of anxiety can lead you

to perceive your partner as inconsistent and even provoke your partner to act inconsistently. Then, in a vicious cycle, you may end up feeling more anxious. Either way, information about your partner can provide useful insight into your insecure relationship.

Insecure love takes on different colorations as a relationship evolves. At the beginning there are the pounding heart and sweaty palms, the goose bumps of nervous arousal at the mere thought of the beloved, and the frequent, sometimes frantic phone calls. Later, when the insecure lover has invested more emotionally in the relationship and has more to lose, insecure love can show itself as *jealousy.* Many people at one time or another have been either on the giving or receiving end of intense jealousy: the obsessive preoccupation with the lover's whereabouts, the accusing questions, the compulsion to search dresser drawers for incriminating evidence or to cruise the streets to locate a certain person's car. The aura of romance and the excitement of infatuation—let alone trust and mutual respect—may be shattered by the destructive symptoms of romantic insecurity.

Finally, when the relationship ends, it is usually the insecure lover who is jilted. This person may be left feeling that life has lost its zest, that there is hardly energy left to get out of bed in the morning. There is a hollow, empty feeling, as if the core of one's being has been cut out. One may alternate between cursing the ex-lover and longing, even pleading, for his or her return. These are feelings of *depression,* and, like jealousy, they are commonly found in the same people who earlier manifested the feelings, thoughts, and behavior of insecure love.

Anxious attachment (or detachment), jealousy, and depression are all pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of insecure love. They are like barometers registering at key intervals in the history of a love affair or marriage, all of them measuring the same thing—the quality of a person's emotional connections with others. The character of a relationship is revealed when the relationship begins, when it is threatened, and when it ends. By looking at each of these stages in turn, we can trace the typical course of a relationship driven by one or both partners' insecurity.

Although our research has confirmed many of these descriptive features of insecure love, its most original contribution, we believe, lies in shedding some light on prior family relationships that contribute to a person's later susceptibility to insecure love. In the introductory case, both Elaine and Steve had domineering, intrusive mothers and aloof, withdrawn fathers. This background was important in shaping both partners' later development,

although it had different implications for Elaine as a woman than for Steve as a man. It represents one, but far from the only, type of family pattern that may later lead to anxious romantic attachment in adulthood.

A person is (in varying degrees) more likely to feel insecure in love if one or both parents are rejecting, indifferent, or inconsistent in their demonstrations of affection. There is a clear contrast between the parents who are remote disciplinarians and those who establish a warm, nurturing relationship with a child. Parents who provide a model of an emotionally secure relationship can help a child avoid anxious attachments.

Among the families of female and male victims of insecure love, there are similarities as well as polar opposites; these will be highlighted throughout the book. Yet the *experience* of insecure love remains the same for both sexes, making mutual understanding an easier task. If insecure romantic love has been a part of your experience, you will be able to gain insight into both your own and your partner's feelings and behavior.

The roots of our study lie primarily in the work of psychoanalyst John Bowlby and psychologist Mary Ainsworth, who studied the different kinds of emotional attachments that infants form with their mothers. They observed that infants whose mothers respond reliably and sensitively to their needs tend to form secure attachments. When the mother is not reliably responsive, the infant may become anxious, noisily demanding contact with the mother while often avoiding actual contact. When the mother abuses or regularly overstimulates, the infant may turn away when in the greatest need. These patterns of attachment, if reinforced in early childhood and adolescence, may persist throughout life. In the three styles of infant behavior just described, there are similarities to three habitual approaches to adult romantic love: secure, anxiously attached, and detached.

The emotional relationships you form as an adult cannot, of course, be explained completely by the way your mother treated you when you were an infant. On the contrary, as you grew up you experienced many different kinds of attachments that may have played a part in your learning to feel secure or insecure in your connections with people. Our study explores a number of dimensions of mother-child, father-child, and even mother-father relationships as they affect later emotional attachments. It is important to understand what these relationships were like in your own life because, if you do not, you may be doomed to repeat them.

People who are habitually insecure in love relationships would say they are looking for acceptance, nurturance, and unconditional love. Yet they typically repeat destructive patterns over and over again, reexperiencing the rejection and the struggle against it. This sounds like such a painful way of life; why would people choose it? Perhaps because the struggle, having begun in infancy or childhood, is so familiar that it has become easier than more risky alternatives. Perhaps because, fearing the worst, people often see evidence to support it, which confirms repeatedly their negative view of themselves and their experience. Or perhaps there is some promise of ultimate resolution and mastery that the never-ending struggle falsely holds out.

To stop handicapping oneself in these ways, self-understanding and pattern-breaking experiences (which offer different rewards) are required. Therapy can help by bringing the sources of self-defeating behavior to conscious understanding and mastery. We hope that our findings about the childhood origins of insecure love, together with case histories of self-discovery and personal growth, will prove similarly helpful. If so, all of us will be better able not only to overcome any limitations of our personal histories, but also to serve as models of emotional security for our children and to prepare them to enter into love relationships more confidently and successfully.