

THE KICKASS COUPLE

**7 Secrets to Transform
Your Relationship**

Dr. Gloria Lee

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To Clark, Jaden, Tristan, and Brianna, the loves of my life, who
show me what heaven on earth is like every day.

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Introduction

Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy—the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.

—**Brené Brown**

It is strange and amazing to me that I'm writing a book today about how to be a kickass couple. I come from a family that was not good at creating or maintaining healthy relationships. My parents' marriage deteriorated over the course of my childhood, and eventually, they got divorced.

Unbeknownst to my five siblings and me during our developmental years, witnessing our parents' unhealthy marriage had detrimental effects on how we would eventually experience relationships as adults. Four of my siblings got married and divorced, and my other sibling

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has never had a successful relationship. Miraculously, my husband, Clark, and I are the only ones who are still married. However, I know I'm no different than the rest of my family; therefore, I needed to learn how to have a healthy and lasting relationship.

I vowed never to be like my parents, a couple who were not affectionate, appeared to dislike each other, and argued incessantly. I wanted my relationship to succeed. This conviction led me to the field of counseling and psychology. I was fascinated with what I was learning in the area of individual growth and development, and how it impacted our connections with others. Everything about my upbringing seemed to make sense now. I could understand why my parents' marriage ended.

The teaching that struck me the most was *attachment theory*. This theory postulates that all humans innately need close emotional bonds with significant others. Moreover, our attachment with our main caregivers during childhood considerably influences how we connect and bond with others throughout our lifetime, especially with our romantic partners.

When I started dating Clark, I applied everything that I was learning in my studies and counseling practice to our relationship. I realized how much I struggled with healthy attachment. It was hard to feel safe and confident in our bond. I often expected the worst to happen.

When in fear, I had the tendency to criticize, attack, and argue. Basically, what I vowed to not be like, I was becoming. However, I persisted in practicing "unlearning" unhealthy connections and "re-learning" healthy attachment. I discovered that romantic love was about being that reliable, emotional connection and comfort to my partner. But to become that source, I first had to learn how to be that to myself.

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I have a rule of thumb with my clients that I don't ask them to do anything I wouldn't be willing to do myself. In fact, I practice most things first before asking them to do it. This way I know what works and what I can confidently offer my clients.

After twenty plus years of personal growth and development, working with a multitude of couples to develop these seven secrets to transform your relationship, and practicing them in my marriage, I have no doubt in my mind that these are the fundamentals to creating and maintaining a fulfilling, lifelong relationship.

Knowing your attachment needs and providing your partner with their attachment needs are the keys to a lasting, passionate bond.

In part, I wrote this book for myself, my husband, and my three children. It is a memoir of my childhood and my love story with Clark. It is also a testimony to my children that they are now the beginning of a new generation of trust and hope in having a secure and close attachment in their relationships; the intergenerational transmission of pain and insecure bonds has ceased with me.

I wrote this book as candidly and authentically as I could. Although I am a deeply private person and prefer to stay in the background, I didn't hold back on sharing my personal story that I felt apprehensive to tell. I remind myself that if I dare to ask my clients to be vulnerable and real with their stories, then I too must have the integrity to do the same.

I also wrote this book to offer hope and encouragement to those who are suffering in their relationships. This book is not written as your "typical" self-help book with tips and tools. Rather, I share real-life stories of transformation, growth, and restoration about myself and my clients based on practicing these seven core principles.

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Your story is in ours. My hope is for those who read this book to feel encouraged that if “regular” people like my clients and I can change and flourish, despite our disadvantaged beginnings, then so can you. Anyone can.

I am grateful to my courageous clients who have trusted me in journeying alongside them to heal and transform their relationships for good. They have taught me something new in every session and have helped me to become a better therapist. It is such a privilege for me to continually listen and learn from them. May you also glean wisdom from their stories, as I have.

Clients’ names and any identifying factors have been changed to protect their confidentiality. Some stories are composites of several couples and have been modified to reflect the general principles that I’ve learned.

My writing is based on the amalgamation of almost thirty years of research, readings, training, and over twenty years of professional practice. Thus, some of my thoughts may unintentionally overlap with similar work in the field. However, I have referenced all work that I have specifically sourced.

This book is intended for all couples: young, middle-aged, old, dating, engaged, cohabitating, married, straight, gay, or somewhere in between, happy, and unhappy. The principles of this book apply to couples from diverse backgrounds, all cultures, and all walks of life.

This book is for those who are at the beginning of their relationship and want to be proactive and successful, but also for couples who have been together for a while, who may be in a rut and want to resurrect their connection. It is a book that will provide hope and encouragement for couples who really need the support. I also wrote

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this book for couples who have been together for a long time and simply wish to rekindle their bond. I am confident that you will find inspiration and renewed commitment by reading this book. If you desire to transform your relationship into a safe and secure lifelong attachment, this book is for you.

Notably, I wrote for single people who want to learn the secrets to having a healthy and long-term bond. May you vicariously learn through other couples' stories and get a head start in preparing yourself for a vitalized relationship. And for individuals who have tried their hand in relationships and have not had much success, this book is for you. May you finally break free from the painful and repetitive problems in your relationships and learn how to connect in a deep and meaningful way for good.

This book is not intended for readers who are in an abusive or violent relationship, are struggling with serious addictions, have severe mental health concerns, or are having an affair. These conditions and activities are contraindicative to the effectiveness of engaging with the practices of this book.

By reading this book, you will understand yourself better and learn how your past affects who you are today and the way you show up in your relationship. For some of you, grasping the content may require a total mind shift, and that's what this book is for. It offers a unique way to conceptualize issues in your relationship from an attachment lens and focuses on you as a partner, instead of providing surface solutions that have no lasting impact.

I present simple and effective principles to transform you and your relationship permanently and deeply, so you can achieve a lifetime of love. I believe you can do it, as many other couples and I also have. May the journey begin for you and your partner to become a kickass couple.

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CHAPTER 1

What Is a Kickass Couple?

The most beautiful thing is to see a person you love smiling. And even more beautiful is knowing that you are the reason behind it.

—Unknown

Yes, you *can* have it all as a couple. This doesn't mean that you will be a "perfect couple." Rather, it means that you can have the qualities and aspects of a healthy, vibrant, and long-lasting relationship that we all want.

My Journey

Relationships fail for many reasons. I come from a family that exemplifies several of them.

My father is the youngest of five children. He was born and raised in China. The story told by his older siblings (because my dad did not share much about his upbringing) was that their biological parents were tragically murdered when my father was an infant. From there, he was taken in by the village grandmother, who raised him as her own. My father adored this woman, whom he viewed as his own mother. However, before the age of ten, his adoptive mother died of starvation due to extreme poverty. From then on, my father was raised by his older siblings. He never had a formal education and lived in poverty his entire childhood. Dad learned to hustle and swindle to survive. Somehow, he smuggled his way to Hong Kong for a better life. This is where he met my mother.

My mother is the oldest of eleven children. She was born and raised in Hong Kong. Most of her childhood was defined as being a caretaker to her ten younger siblings. From the stories told by her siblings (because my mom also did not share about her upbringing), Mom did not have much of a childhood. My grandfather worked as a carpenter, and my grandmother stayed at home with the children. The family lived in social housing throughout Mom's childhood. She had an elementary school education but dropped out to take care of her siblings. At nineteen years of age, she met my father and shortly after, gave birth to my oldest sibling. Within eight years, my parents had six children: five girls and one boy (the long-awaited golden child). I am number four of six children.

As a young couple in their twenties, my parents immigrated to Vancouver, Canada, in the 1970s. Like many immigrant families,

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they hoped for greater opportunities and a better future for their children. However, when they arrived, they faced multiple systemic barriers. They were poor, did not speak English, had limited employment opportunities, were not familiar with the local resources, and were racially discriminated against. In addition, my parents had little social support, from just a couple of families that they knew.

We lived with my paternal uncle's family for a while until my parents were able to move out on their own. During this time of shared accommodations, fourteen of us lived in one townhouse. When my parents finally bought a place of their own, my mother's family immigrated shortly after and lived with us throughout most of my childhood, until I was in my mid-teens.

What I remember about my parents' relationship was my mom complaining to my dad about money issues, my dad getting upset at my mom, and them fighting on a regular basis. My mother took out her frustrations on the children, and my father withdrew to his work.

In those days, it was common practice for caregivers from my culture to use corporal punishment as discipline. All I learned from this type of discipline was to fear and dislike my parents and not rely on them to get my needs met.

My parents eventually divorced, and revelations about a long-term affair that my father had were exposed. I have three half-brothers, whom I have never met, from this relationship.

I met my husband, Clark, when I was a broken and messed-up teenager. I was not set up to have a "successful" relationship. After several years of dating, we got married. At the time of writing this

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book, we have been married for twenty-three years. Given the statistics for people like me, who come from a divorced home and were subjected to childhood adversities, I should not still be married.

When I consider my parents' and siblings' marriages, they looked almost identical. My relationship with Clark also started off the same way when we were dating—poor communication, even worse conflict resolution skills, and a lack of self-awareness. In theory, I also should have had a terrible marriage and be divorced like everyone else in my family. I was no better. But two things made a difference in saving my marriage. One, my faith. Two, studying and practicing counseling.

A New Way of Transforming Your Relationship

In this book, you will learn the top reasons why relationships either succeed or fail. I will unpack the most common issues couples face. You will discover practical and effective strategies to break free from these painful, repetitive experiences.

I will reveal the secrets to creating a strong emotional connection with your partner so you will fall in love again and again. You will learn to develop a trusting bond where you are emotionally attuned and responsive to each other's needs. You will also find healthy ways to express your needs so that you receive what you are looking for and feel closer to your partner.

Common Observations and Errors About Couples

I have observed common errors with every couple I have worked with—from young teens to elderly couples, and from all walks of life.

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The first observation is that a partner's childhood experiences with their primary caregivers have a powerful effect on who they are today and how they relate to their partner. The error is that most couples do not realize how much this experience has had an impact on their current relationship. They believe they have left their past behind, grown, and become better somehow.

The second observation is that most couples believe the core of their problem is due to ineffective communication. In fact, this is the top reason why couples come for counseling. However, poor communication is far from the core issue. Your communication problems with your partner are simply a reaction to unfinished business from childhood projected into your current relationship. Therefore, working on communication alone is akin to treating the symptom rather than the root cause.

The third observation is that couples argue about who is right or wrong and think this argument is due to personality differences. Truth is, the core issue is not about being right or wrong, but rather being heard and validated. Both partners are more similar than they think. In fact, they lose these key moments to heal their past and bond as a couple by arguing about who is right or wrong.

The final observation is that most couples believe that their partner is the problem. Therefore, they focus on changing their partner, in the hopes of getting along better. However, this focus on changing the other person leads only to disappointment and hurt in both partners. Each person ends up feeling judged and blamed for the problems in the relationship. Moreover, neither party feels understood.

What Couples Do When Feeling Stuck

If you are like most couples, you fight about the same things repeatedly. Most conflicts are about petty things. They escalate and then go in circles because neither partner is listening to the other. Arguments typically stop when one or both people feel exhausted or exasperated. Couples end up feeling stuck, frustrated, misunderstood, and alone.

Often, couples opt to seek help at this stage and engage in couples therapy, in the hopes that a therapist will help them resolve their problems. Some couples benefit from counseling when the focus goes beyond the surface issue. But many couples do not benefit because they work only on superficial behavioral changes. These couples end up in the same stuck place sometime after finishing therapy. Then, they become discouraged and believe there is no hope since even therapy can't help them. They are just too different. The couple feels worn down and is tired of trying, so they stop. It is too hard.

Some couples try to “fix” the problem themselves by reading self-help books on communication or relationships. Again, there is little change in the partnership, or the change is short-lived because couples focus on the wrong thing—the symptoms instead of the root cause. Over time, these couples come to believe that their relationship has failed because of incompatible personalities, unrealistic expectations, or because one partner did not try hard enough. Again, couples give up trying.

At this point, some couples choose to stay together and co-exist as roommates or, worse, cellmates. Those who stay together often disclose that they do so for the sake of the kids, or because they have been together for so long, or their finances and assets are tied

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together. Basically, they stay together for reasons other than love and wanting to be together.

Other couples call it quits; they separate or divorce and go their own way. Some people eventually find a new partner. They have renewed hope with a fresh start. They believe they have learned from their mistakes and will do better in their new relationship. However, over time, many individuals find that they repeat the same unhealthy patterns and start feeling familiar hurts, disappointment, and hopelessness.

I have worked with individuals who have had a string of failed marriages or long-term relationships. They are perplexed at why their relationships keep failing and how they end up feeling the same way. Clients explain that they have tried so hard to find a completely different partner, in hopes of preventing similar mistakes, but things still play out the same anyway. I simply ask them, “What’s the common denominator in all these relationships?” The answer is, “You.”

This book introduces a different way of looking at relationships, in understanding how they thrive and why they fall apart. There are lessons in self-discovery to help you understand why you behave and react in a certain way in your relationship. We will explore why you are attracted to certain types of partners and examine who you are as a partner. Then, we’ll describe how these factors impact your relationship, for better or worse. Finally, you will learn simple and effective ways of creating lasting, positive changes. You will discover the secrets to transform your relationship for good.

Real-Life Stories

It is possible to change your relationship no matter how young or old you are, or if you have only been together for a little while or a long time. You *can* get the love you want.

When I think about hope for transformation in a relationship, I often reminisce about a couple I worked with about a decade ago, Nan and Edward. They had been together for over forty-five years when they first came to see me. I was their fourth therapist over the course of their relationship. Having seen so many therapists before, they were not hopeful that this time would be any different. They told me I was their “last-ditch effort to stay together.” No pressure, right?

Thankfully, through their journey of self-discovery in couples therapy, Nan and Edward were able to understand and appreciate one another in a way that they never had before. This depth of knowing, hearing, and seeing each other helped them to work through their personal hurts accumulated over the years, listen deeply to one another, and forge a new connection of love.

Their story is not unique. I have seen plenty of couples turn their relationship around in a similar fashion. Partners learn to talk to each other without their conversations erupting into conflicts. Each person feels heard and understood for the first time, which then enables both people to engage in more difficult topics that were usually avoided. Most of all, couples report feeling loved by their partner, in the exact way they needed to be loved.

Take, for instance, Jo and Mitch, who were in their seventh year of marriage and felt disconnected and unhappy after having two young children. Like many couples in this stage of life, they were overwhelmed with responsibilities such as chores, parenting,

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and work. Neither partner thought they were getting their needs met in the relationship. Jo and Mitch felt disengaged. Both were overworked, overtired, and overwhelmed, and had little to give the other or invest in their relationship. They became more impatient, unkind, and angry with each other.

Conversations revolved around Jo complaining to Mitch about what he was not doing around the house and how she needed him to change. The more she complained, the more he avoided her. The more he avoided her, the more she got upset at him for not dealing with problems. As time went on, her frustration grew and his fear of getting criticized increased. Anytime Jo tried to bring up an issue, they would either end up fighting or Mitch would become quiet and leave the room. These cycles became daily and predictable. This couple was at a standstill and knew their relationship was in trouble. This is when they came to see me.

In our first session, Mitch and Jo discovered the real reasons why they were so unhappy with each other. It wasn't about the dishes. They learned why they always ended up fighting, and we immediately started to shift their dynamic. They practiced a new way of listening to each other, and I asked them to continue until we met again. When I saw them two weeks later for their second session, they reported having no fights the previous two weeks. Mitch and Jo were in disbelief that change could be that radical; it essentially stopped years of daily fighting.

Of course, this couple was not miraculously fixed after the first session. But because they had a breakthrough by understanding their cycle of fighting and modifying the way they listened to each other, it prepared them to do the deeper work of making lasting changes in their relationship.

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I don't believe that couples should try harder or do more to improve their relationship. Prescribing behavioral skills are usually short-lived and unsustainable. Rather, I advocate for simple and attainable personal change that leads to effective, deep, and lasting transformations in yourself and between partners.

Take for instance Jeff and Cole's relationship. When they first came to see me, they were not on talking terms. Cole initiated counseling in hopes that the two of them would start speaking again. They had been together for four years, and before this relationship, both had come from another long-term relationship that had ended badly. Because they were aware of the negative breakups with all their previous relationships, they hoped to work on this one instead of starting anew and ending up in the same place again.

During our time together, Jeff and Cole came to realize the source of their struggles in their relationship and why they felt triggered by the other. They became aware of the similarities in how they dealt with conflicts and how their parents did. We explored how their parents connected with Jeff and Cole during their respective childhoods. This couple discovered they still had some of the same triggers they had back then.

They were committed to stop perpetuating the same conflict pattern as their parents. Jeff and Cole wanted to understand how to communicate and fight in a healthier way. Over the course of six sessions, they went from quarreling several times a day to having only a "small bickering" (in their own words) every few months.

Recalibration

Some of you may wonder if it's possible to change your relationship. Perhaps you have tried different methods, engaged in therapy, or read other books which produced limited results. You are right to be cautious. I do not offer a magic formula or teach tricks and tips to quickly make your relationship better. Rather, I propose a different way of understanding yourself, your partner, and your relationship, which then shifts your approach to problems in your intimate partnership. By applying the principles of this book to your love life and practicing them consistently and intentionally, you will naturally transform your relationship for good.

You will not be focusing on your partner in the hopes that they will change. Instead, I describe ways to effect deep internal personal changes to permanently transform your relationship. You will focus on *yourself* as a partner, what you bring to the table (the good and the bad), and how it impacts your relationship. You will discover how you've learned to relate to an intimate partner.

We'll examine (a) your beliefs about relationships and how they (b) drive your perceptions about your partner, which in turn (c) fuel your feelings and (d) compel you to behave in a way that instigates disagreements. These disputes then confirm your preconceived notions about your relationship. You will learn to correct these self-fulfilling prophecies, understand your deeper unmet needs, and explore healthier ways to get these needs met. As a result, you will discover how to repair relational bonds and shift your reactions toward your partner.

Greater self-awareness and understanding about your beliefs, perceptions, emotions, and needs encourage corrective behavior, which then disrupts the vicious cycle of conflict in your relationship.

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In essence, you learn to stop hurting yourself and your partner by interrupting the predictable repetitive patterns in how you fight.

For some readers, you may be concerned that your partner does not want to read this book with you or engage in this process. Although it's best for you to do this work together, change is still possible even if only one partner starts the transformation. I have worked independently with several individuals who have single-handedly changed their relationships. As the saying goes, it takes two to tango. Thus, when one partner changes their dance routine in the relationship, it changes the tango between the couple. Your partner cannot do their dance move if you refuse to do yours. Accordingly, a new dance is created.

Cultivation

It is best to read this book from beginning to end. Each chapter revolves around a central principle that builds on the next. Soak in the lessons of each chapter, one at a time. Practice consistently and intentionally. Go slow and deep. Less is more.

Once you feel confident that you are applying and practicing the principles of that chapter, move on to the next one. You will feel encouraged and motivated to forge ahead as you master each lesson.

Remember, if multitudes of people have benefited from these lessons, so can you. This is the path to becoming a kickass couple.

Thank you for reading. Hope you enjoyed chapter 1 of The Kickass Couple: 7 Secrets to Transform Your Relationship.

If you'd like to continue learning the key principles and practices to repair your bond and create deep and meaningful changes in your relationship, click below to purchase your copy.

**The Kickass Couple:
7 Secrets to Transform Your Relationship.**

Click here to visit www.DrGloriaLee.com to access the accompanying online course for this book and to inquire about her 1:1 and group coaching services.