

What Two People Need

A book-course about what love quietly dies without — and
how to keep it alive

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About this book

Twenty-one needs, three principles, one goal — to keep it warm between you. This book-course gathers what psychology, neuroscience, and sociology have learned about close relationships and translates it into plain human language: short, full of stories, and free of dullness. Every chapter is about one simple thing that keeps "together" alive. It reads in an evening and works for years.

16+. This book is educational and is no substitute for working with a psychologist or a couples therapist. All the stories are composites.

From the authors

Maxim Fyodorov and **Natalia Fyodorova** are a couple and the authors of this book.

We came at our relationship in an unusual way: we started studying all of this from the very first days — not to fix what was already broken, but to avoid reinventing the wheel and stepping on the same rakes others have. After all, we're not the first couple in the world: humanity has mountains of experience and research behind it, and it would be naive to walk that road blind. So from the very beginning we decided to lean on that knowledge.

And everything written here we didn't just read about — we test it on ourselves every day; our own union is the laboratory where it all gets checked against real life. The main result of this experience: our feelings haven't faded over time — on the contrary, they've grown. And that's the best proof that the approach works.

We gathered what science knows about close relationships and translated it from dry academic language into human language — into a practical, warm map. Not a view from above, but notes from the inside: from two people who are walking this road and want it to turn out as well for you — or better.

And maybe the most important thing. There's almost no point in reading this book alone. A relationship is a game for two: if only one person holds the map, they can't fix what depends on both. We worked through these chapters together — on morning walks, sitting under a tree, recalling moments from our own life and from the lives of couples we know. It was

exactly in conversations like these that dry ideas became *ours*. So the best way to keep reading is **together**: a chapter, then a conversation. And not "which of us is right," but "so how are we doing with this?"

Prologue. The invisible list

They love each other. They really do.

And yet one morning they catch themselves eating breakfast in silence — like two fellow travelers on a train who can't get away from each other. Nobody cheated. Nobody shouted. It's just that between them it became... empty. The warmth went somewhere, and it's unclear when.

Sound familiar? If not — someday you'll be lucky enough to see it in friends. And the story is almost always the same, and it sounds insultingly simple: **love alone turned out not to be enough.**

Not because the feeling wasn't real. But because inside each of us there's a list. Long, unspoken, most often invisible even to ourselves. On it is everything we need to receive from the person close to us in order to feel good beside them: to feel loved, needed, safe, free, desired. As long as the items on this list keep getting checked off — love breathes. The moment they're ignored for months — even a strong feeling starts quietly to suffocate. No scandals. It just fades.

The good news: this list isn't endless or mysterious. The scientists who spent decades observing thousands of couples have, broadly speaking, decoded it. It has about **two dozen items**. And almost every fight, hurt, and "we've drifted apart" is a signal that one of them has been glowing red for a long time.

This book is a map of your list and theirs.

And here's what matters: you don't have to open it only when there's already a fire. Yes, it'll help repair what's gone wrong — it'll show which item exactly has sagged and what to do about it. But the best moment for it is *the very beginning*, when you're just getting together and you both have maximum interest in and energy for each other. At the start it's cheapest to lay the right foundation: habits of warmth, trust, and care — while there's nothing to "fix" yet. Strong couples aren't the ones who got lucky; they're the ones

who took up their "together" in advance. So whether you're reading this on your third date or in the fifteenth year of marriage — you're right on time: some are building, others are repairing, and the book is for both.

We won't burden you with theory. Every chapter is about one living thing: what it is, why it works the way it does (the science is here, but tucked into small footnotes — look if you get curious), how to tell when it's missing, and what to do about it starting today. At the end of each chapter there's one line worth taking with you.

How the journey is laid out. We've sorted the twenty-one needs into six clear blocks — six module-chapters:

1. **Love and connection** — about how to love, be loved, and stay close.
2. **Safety and support** — about having someone at your back, care, and "with you it's not scary."
3. **Recognition and significance** — about how important it is to be noticed and needed.
4. **Faithfulness** — about devotion and grown-up responsibility.
5. **Unity and freedom** — about a "we" that doesn't smother the "I."
6. **Pleasure and beauty** — about passion, joy, and the spark.

Then come **three principles** that turn this set into a working system. And the finale — about how all of this fits into a happy life as a whole.

And one small request: if there's any way to, read this not alone but together with the person you want things to get warmer with. This book works with four hands.

Ready? Then let's start at the very beginning — with the thing it's all set up for.

Chapter 1. Love and connection

This is where the core lives — five needs out of which the very sense of "we're close" grows. To love and be loved, to trust, to be understood, to keep each other warm. If this chapter is in order for you, almost everything else is easier to fix. Let's begin.

Giving is strength

need №1 · "to love"

Picture two people. One is always asking himself, "what's in it for me?" The other, "what can I give?" In a year, guess which of them is happier. Spoiler: not the one who was receiving.

We're used to thinking of love as something that *comes to us*. But there's a separate, very ancient need — **to love, ourselves**. To give care, warmth, attention. This isn't sacrifice or "a lack of self-love" — it's a built-in mechanism: when you take care of someone close, the pleasure centers in your own brain switch on.¹ Erich Fromm put it more bluntly: the capacity to *give* isn't weakness, it's the highest expression of strength. Love is a verb, not a souvenir.²

And here's what matters: by giving, you win twice. People who support their partners live with lower levels of stress — and in long-term studies, *those who gave care turned out to be healthier than those who only received it*.³

Warning signs. You have no one to give your stored-up warmth to — and it sours into irritation. Or your gestures of attention keep getting waved off: "no, don't bother, I'll do it myself." Love that isn't allowed to spill over turns into resentment.

What to do. - Every day, look for one specific chance to give something — from a cup of tea to "I'm proud of you." - Accept care in return. Care that gets rejected snuffs out the other person's desire to give.

Remember: love is measured not by how much you were given, but by how much you managed to give — and it's you who comes out richer.

A quiet harbor

need №2 · "to be loved"

You come home crushed — a failure at work, everything falling apart. And all you want is for one single person in the world to say: "come here. I'm with you. we'll get through it."

This is the second basic need — **to be loved**. To feel that you're accepted, valued, and won't be abandoned — exactly as you are, flaws and quirks and all. Psychologists call this secure attachment, and the pull toward it is one of the most powerful human motives, "from the cradle to the grave."⁴ We literally vitally need to feel a strong close bond — this isn't a whim, it's the foundation of the psyche.⁵

Without that feeling a person is lonely even in a relationship. And with it — you have a "quiet harbor" you can return to in any storm, and out of which you're not afraid to head into the world.

Warning signs. Jealousy, constant checking — "do you even love me?", the fear of being abandoned. Or, the reverse, a defensive "I don't need anyone" — that's how the same unmet need gets hidden.

What to do. - Speak of love directly — in words, in touch, in attention. "It goes without saying" doesn't work here. - In your partner's anxious moment, be a harbor, not an advisor: first "I'm here," then everything else.

Remember: home isn't walls, it's the person you can come back to no matter what state you're in.

When you can take off the armor

need №3 · "closeness and trust"

He told her something he'd never told anyone — an old, shameful, painful story. He spoke staring at the table. And she just held his hand and didn't interrupt. When he finished, there was more between them than there had been an hour before.

That "more" is **closeness** — the sense that beside you is a person to whom you can show yourself without armor. And closeness rests on **trust**: the certainty that you won't be betrayed and that your vulnerability won't be used against you. One doesn't live without the other: you can truly grow close only with someone you trust.⁷

Trust isn't vows, it's accumulated experience: "he's reliable, she's responsive." The higher the trust, the deeper the closeness, and the less jealousy and walls there are in a couple.²⁰

Warning signs. You communicate "about logistics," but not from the heart. Off-limits topics have appeared. You feel like checking the phone. All of this is about sagging trust.

What to do. - Keep small promises: trust is assembled from a hundred kept "I'll buy it," "I'll call," "I'll be on time." - Respond to candor with care — don't judge or belittle. One ill-timed snicker closes a person off for a long time. - Go to vulnerability first yourself. Closeness is an exchange, not an interrogation.

In the margins: money, secret stashes, and trust

Money is a frequent test of trust, and the science here is strict. A hidden account, a secret stash, a concealed debt — this is even called "financial infidelity": such secrets are tied to noticeably lower relationship satisfaction.¹⁵² And fights over money are the single strongest type of conflict predicting divorce, stronger than any other.¹⁵³ And the reverse: in a rare *randomized* experiment, couples who merged their finances held together more strongly than those who kept everything separate.¹⁵⁴

But the point isn't money as such — it's the **secret** and the mindset. An open "rainy-day fund for us" cushion and a secret stash "in case we split up" are psychologically opposite: the first strengthens "we," the second quietly prepares the ground for a breakup (and not infrequently hastens it). Personal money and reasonable independence are fine; what's not fine is the **secret**.

So the question isn't "should we pool everything into one wallet," but a simple one: *does my partner know about this? are we deciding it together? what is this cushion working toward — our shared future, or my escape runway?* Transparency heals; secrecy erodes.

Remember: closeness begins where you can take off the armor and know you won't be hit where you're exposed.

"I understand you" — almost like "I love you"

need №4 · "mutual understanding and acceptance"

She moved to a new city and is wilting: lonely, everything foreign. He could have said the standard "ah, don't worry, it'll all work out." But he said something else: "I get it. it really is hard for you right now, you miss home. let's figure out how to settle you in here." And it released her.

The difference is in **understanding and acceptance**. Understanding is when you feel: I've truly been heard. Acceptance is when you're seen with all your flaws and they still don't want to remake you. The psychologist Carl Rogers called such unconditional acceptance the main condition under which a person is even capable of growing.¹³ And modern research shows: the feeling of "I'm understood" is strongly linked both to relationship satisfaction and even to well-being.²⁰

A small bonus: understanding matters not only in trouble. When you sincerely rejoice in your partner's wins, the bond strengthens even more than when you comfort in grief.²³

Warning signs. Frequent "you don't hear me" and "they want to change me." The urge to argue and prove rather than just be there.

What to do. - First name the feeling ("I can see you're hurt"), and only then — solutions. Not the other way around. - Don't belittle: "it's nothing, forget it" is the opposite of acceptance. - Remember: to understand doesn't mean to agree. You can accept a feeling without sharing the conclusion.

Remember: to be understood is almost like being loved. Give it to the other person — and you'll get it back.

The hug that heals

need №5 · "warmth and tenderness"

She came in angry and worn out. He didn't start interrogating her about what had happened — he just walked over and hugged her in silence, stroking her back. A minute — and her shoulders dropped, the anger melted away. "I needed your hug so much," she breathed out.

This is **tenderness** — the soft, warm language of love, understood without words. Hugs, touches, a gentle tone, "come here." It seems like a trifle, but in fact it's a powerful medicine: warm physical contact with someone close calms the body, lowers blood pressure and

stress-hormone levels.³² Couples who hug often and aren't shy about tenderness in everyday life are, on average, more satisfied with each other.

Without tenderness, love doesn't disappear — it goes stale. It turns dry, businesslike, "on schedule." And yet it's precisely the warmth in the small things that keeps feelings from cooling.

Warning signs. You live like polite neighbors: everything correct, but without touches and gentle words. You feel a pull toward warmth — or, on the contrary, your body has walled itself off.

What to do. - Bring tenderness back into daily life: hug on greeting, touch "just because," kiss for no reason. - In a hard moment, give warmth first (a hand, a hug), then words. - Watch your tone. A warm intonation softens even an argument.

Remember: sometimes a hug says "I love you" more precisely than any words.

Chapter 2. Safety and support

Love blossoms only where it isn't scary. This chapter is about having someone at your back: about how to be each other's support, protection, and a place where you can breathe out. Five needs that answer one question: "with you, am I safe?"

"You're not alone"

need №6 · "care"

He came down with a fever. She canceled her plans, brewed tea, tucked him under a blanket, and simply stayed nearby. He fell asleep with the thought: I'm not alone, there's someone to look after me. In the morning he felt better — and not only because of the tea.

Care is attention to how you're really doing. The readiness to lend a shoulder in a hard moment. And here there's a subtlety that almost everyone misses: what matters isn't the help itself, but **responsiveness** — hitting on what the person truly needs right now. Scientists call sensitivity to each other's needs the cornerstone of closeness.²⁰ And the kind of care that works best is the quiet, unobtrusive kind, the kind that doesn't rub your nose in your own helplessness.²²

And a person close by is, quite literally, a painkiller. In one experiment, women waited for a mild electric shock; when they held their husband's hand, the brain reacted to the threat noticeably more weakly — and the more weakly the happier the marriage.³⁹

Warning signs. You've stopped talking about your troubles — "they won't respond anyway." You handle everything alone, even though there's a person right there.

What to do. - First ask: "do you want me to help, to hug you, or just to listen?" — and give exactly that. - Help in a way that doesn't humiliate. Support isn't an occasion to remind someone who's the stronger one here.

Remember: care isn't about "fixing" a person, it's about hitting on what they need right now.

Backup

need №7 · "support"

She decided to change careers and was afraid she wouldn't manage. He didn't talk her out of it, and he didn't stay silent — he worked out a plan with her, took on part of the household load to free up her evenings, and from time to time repeated: "you're doing it, I believe in you." A year later — a new profession. And the feeling that they're a team.

Support is "I've got your back." Emotional (listening, encouraging), practical (taking on part of the load), and verbal (advice, when asked for). When you have reliable backup, you take bolder risks and absorb blows more easily: this is the long-described "buffer effect" — a close person softens the blows of stress to the psyche.⁴⁰

This isn't a metaphor but a matter of health and longevity: the quality and presence of close ties affect the risk of early death no less than quitting smoking does.⁴¹ Beside a reliable person the brain works in an energy-saving mode — and loneliness literally costs it more.⁴⁶

Warning signs. "Everyone for themselves." You carry your victories and your failures in silence. A feeling has appeared that you live in parallel.

What to do. - Distinguish: does the person need advice right now, or just a shoulder? Ask.
- Support dreams with deeds — free up time, take on part of the chores. - Rejoice in your partner's successes as actively as you comfort them in failures.

Remember: real backup is knowing that, whatever happens, there are still two of you.

Ground under your feet

need №8 · "stability and reliability"

Every morning he drives her to work — an ordinary ritual. In a heavy blizzard the transit stopped, but he set out earlier and drove her anyway. Nothing heroic. Just "he always does what he promised." And from that, it's calm.

Stability is predictability and confidence in the couple's tomorrow. Not boredom, but **ground under your feet:** when you don't have to worry that everything will collapse, a huge amount of energy is freed up for life — growth, your work, children. Maslow placed the need for safety almost at the very bottom for a reason: while the foundation is shaking, you can't build upward.¹ And a reliable, predictable partner is that very secure attachment, beside which you worry less and handle stress better.⁶

By the way, about the spark: predictability and passion aren't enemies. Small shared rituals (common dinners, traditions) give a couple a sense of unity — if both see meaning in them and not empty routine.⁵¹

Warning signs. A dramatic seesaw — split up, got back, split up. A constant "what will happen tomorrow." Anxiety instead of support.

What to do. - Keep your word in the small things — reliability is built from them. - Set up a couple of your own rituals and protect them. - In a crisis, say it out loud: "us — that's not in question; the question is this specific thing."

Remember: stability isn't a cage, it's the foundation on which alone you can build something big.

"With you it's not scary"

need No9 · "protection"

A drunk man latched onto her on the street. He silently stepped between them, calmly and firmly told the man to back off, and led her away. That evening she said: "I feel so calm when you're near. I know you won't let me get hurt."

Protection is knowing that someone close will cover you: will stand up for you before others, won't sell you out, will create an atmosphere at home where you can breathe out. When you have "your person" near, the body literally calms down — a close person's presence lowers physiological fear.³⁹ Under stress people reach out to seek protection from those close to them — and, having received it, they bear trouble more easily.⁴⁵

Protection is the kin sister of trust. If the person you love doesn't stand on your side (or, worse, becomes the source of danger themselves) — the very foundation collapses.

Warning signs. Before others, you're left alone. At home you have to stay on guard. There's no one to cover your back.

What to do. - Stand on your partner's side in front of outsiders — save the debrief for later and in private. - Make home a place free of threats and humiliation. - In anxiety, give support: "I'm here, I won't let you get hurt."

Remember: "with you it's not scary" is one of the most precious phrases you can earn.

A place where you can breathe out

need №10 · "coziness and comfort"

Evening. He's watching a match, she's beside him reading, leaning on his shoulder. The light is dimmed, nobody's in a hurry to go anywhere. Nothing "is happening" — and that's exactly why it's so good.

Coziness is the chance to be yourself and relax beside a person without keeping up appearances. Home as a **quiet harbor**, not as a second job where you have to measure up again. This is an underrated but most important thing: beside someone you feel safe with, the level of the stress hormone drops³⁶ — and the sense of emotional safety is something therapists consider the very foundation of deep connection.⁴⁹ Sometimes just being silent together is more valuable than any conversation.

Warning signs. At home you have to "walk a tightrope," wait for criticism, fear relaxing. You feel pulled to rest anywhere but at home.

What to do. - Cherish the quiet shared rituals — evenings and weekends where nothing has to be achieved. - Turn down the background criticism. Home is a place of acceptance, not appraisals. - Arrange the space together, making it "yours."

Remember: home isn't where it's pretty, it's where you can finally breathe out.

Chapter 3. Recognition and significance

It's not enough for a person to be loved — it matters to them to be *noticed* and *needed*. Three short lessons about how not to let your partner feel invisible — and about how a simple "thank you" holds a couple together more firmly than it seems.

To be noticed

need №11 · "recognition"

A wife defended her dissertation. The husband didn't just mutter "well done" — he told their friends how persistent she was, and thanked her separately: "thank you that, with a load like that, you were still there with us." She felt ten centimeters taller.

Recognition is the need to be noticed and valued: for your efforts, your personality, your contribution not to be taken as something self-evident. Maslow counted esteem and recognition among a person's basic needs.¹ And here's a powerful move: it matters to recognize not only labor but also *joy*. The way you react to your partner's good news — with sincere enthusiasm or half an ear — predicts a couple's happiness sometimes more strongly than support in trouble does.²³

What's more: when you see and confirm the best in a person, you help them become that best — psychologists call this the "Michelangelo effect": a close person seems to carve out of us the version we want to be.⁷⁷

Warning signs. Your partner feels invisible. They try — and hear no response. They start seeking recognition elsewhere: in work, from friends.

What to do. - React to good news vividly, not perfunctorily. - Praise specifically: not "you're great," but "the way you sorted that out with the client was so cool." - Be proud out loud and in front of others.

Remember: people flourish where they're noticed — and wilt where they're taken for granted.

"Without you it's not the same"

need №12 · "to be needed"

The husband, tired, spends an hour wrestling with a leaking faucet. The wife says: "thank you, I couldn't have done it without you — you're my jack of all trades." And something in him straightens up. He's — needed.

This is a separate, very deep need — **to be needed and significant**. To feel that without you the life of someone close would be poorer, that you play a role no one can replace. Scientists call this by a beautiful word — *matter*.⁵² It's literally the glue of a relationship: where both feel their importance to each other, couples are stronger and happier.⁵³

A curious detail: the feeling "I matter to you" is the shared mechanism through which closeness, and conversations, and sex all warm a couple. As long as there's a sense of significance, a shortage of one can be partly compensated by another.⁵⁴

Warning signs. The thought "they'll manage without me / I'm easy to replace." The person either bends over backward proving they're needed, or has given up and drifted off.

What to do. - Say directly what exactly makes your partner irreplaceable to you. - Don't be afraid to ask for help — the chance to be needed is a gift, not a burden. - Notice their unique contribution to your shared life.

Remember: people need not only to be loved — they need to be *needed*.

The magic of the word "thank you"

need №13 · "gratitude"

He picks her up from work every day. It's become a habit; he's stopped noticing it. One day she lingered by the car: "thank you for always picking me up. it really means a lot to me." Simple words — and they warmed him all evening. The next day he showed up in an even better mood.

Gratitude is when each other's contributions don't fade into the background. It sounds banal, but it's one of the most powerful and well-tested "vitamins" for a couple. An everyday "thank you" works like a booster: in diary studies it predicted a rise in closeness and satisfaction literally the next day.⁵⁸ And in a large survey of families, expressing gratitude turned out to be the most robust predictor of marital quality — and even softened the blow of financial hardship.⁶³

The logic is simple: where there's thanks, people keep trying; where everything is "taken as a given," resentments and nitpicking pile up. And the tricky part is that **the first thing people stop thanking each other for is the regular** — for what repeats every day. The guy paid for dinner at a café — "well, he's a man, that's how it should be." The girl did the laundry and ironing for the hundredth time — "well, that goes without saying." The more routine the contribution, the more invisible it is — and the more important it is to name it out loud. It's worth giving thanks not only for feats, but for the invisible backdrop on which your shared life rests.

Warning signs. Each other's kindnesses are taken as a given. Attention shifts to shortcomings. "What about me, I do everything for you."

What to do. - Thank specifically for the routine — for what "goes without saying": the dinner paid for, the laundry, the daily pickup. The more habitual the contribution, the more "thank you" needs to be heard. - Make it a habit — even a short daily "thank you" changes the climate. - Praise the person, not yourself: "you're attentive," not "I got lucky."

Remember: "thank you" costs zero and holds a couple together more firmly than a joint bank account.

Chapter 4. Faithfulness

Love without reliability stays adolescent. This short chapter is about two grown-up things: devotion, which gives confidence in tomorrow, and responsibility, on which respect rests.

"I'm staying"

need №14 · "devotion"

He was offered an excellent position in another city. It sounded tempting — but the travel would hit the family. He discussed it with his wife and turned it down: "the main thing for me is to be near you." She felt not guilt but support: he can be relied on.

Devotion is "I choose you and I'm staying, even when it's hard." Not a cage, but a conscious decision to be on your partner's side and not run at the first difficulties. Sternberg considered it one of the three pillars of love — alongside closeness and passion.¹⁴ And here's what decades of research have shown: devotion rests on three things — how satisfied you are, how much you've already invested, and how unattractive the "alternatives" are.⁶⁵ High mutual devotion is one of the strongest predictors that a couple will endure.

Devotion is visible in actions: the readiness to give something up for the sake of "us" is born precisely from it.⁶⁹ And in couples who've been happy together for decades, even the brain still "lights up" at the sight of a partner's photo, as in early infatuation.⁷³

Warning signs. Suspicious, jealousy, an unwillingness to make commitments, a constant "what if it's better somewhere else." This keeps both in the stress of vigilance.

What to do. - Make devotion visible: show in words and deeds that the two of you are the priority. - Cherish what's invested (shared plans, time) and don't devalue it with "alternatives." - In a fight, hold back from the destructive — that, too, is faithfulness in action.

Remember: devotion isn't "nowhere else to go," it's "there is somewhere, but I choose you."

A grown-up beside you

need №15 · "responsibility"

A baby was born, sleepless nights, both of them at their limit. The husband comes home wrung out — but sees that the wife is more exhausted still, and takes the bath and the bedtime on himself. Not because he's "obligated by the list," but because it's their shared child and their shared task. The wife looks at him with respect: there's a grown-up beside her.

Responsibility is the readiness to keep your word and carry your share, to think not only "what do I want" but also "how will this affect us." Fromm directly called care and responsibility elements of mature love: without them the feeling stays infantile.¹² And satisfaction research confirms something simple: where the load and responsibility are split more or less fairly, things are happier and more durable.

A subtle point: "fairly" in a close relationship isn't the bookkeeping of "you to me, me to you." Start keeping a strict tally of services rendered — and satisfaction drops; couples who care according to need rather than according to a receipt are happier.⁷⁴

Warning signs. One of you systematically "drops out" — of the household, of decisions, of caring for the children — and the whole weight falls on the other. Unfairness accumulates, trust melts away.

What to do. - Split the load fairly, including the invisible work (who remembers the doctors, the gifts, the daycare). - Made a mistake — admit it, apologize, fix it. That restores trust faster than excuses. - Think in terms of "how will this affect us," not "what's more convenient for me."

Remember: grown-up love is two people, each of whom carries their own share and keeps their word.

Chapter 5. Unity and freedom

The most delicate balance in a couple: to be one whole — and yet not dissolve. Two lessons that at first glance argue with each other, but in fact work only together.

Team "we"

need N°16 · "togetherness"

Every Sunday they're together in the mountains or on bikes — that's theirs. As a joke they call themselves "the team." When he lost his job, he told his friends not "I have a problem," but "we decided this is a chance to change something." It was exactly this "we" that pulled them out of the crisis fastest of all.

Togetherness is the sense that you're not just two people under one roof but one "we": shared values, jokes, goals, a feeling of being a team. This isn't sentimentality but a measurable thing. Scientists even count pronouns: in couples whose speech has more "we" (rather than "I" and "you"), interaction is warmer and satisfaction higher.⁸¹ Such couples treat a problem as a common enemy rather than warring with each other.

The secret is also in *how* you help each other. In strong couples, people help according to need — "you need it, I'll do it" — rather than by an exchange of "you to me, me to you."⁸⁴

Warning signs. You live in parallel: there are fewer and fewer shared activities, goals, and stories. "Each on their own" under one roof.

What to do. - Start something of *your own* that's shared — a hobby, a tradition, a goal. - Switch, in your speech and in your head, to "we": the problem is shared, not "yours." - Accumulate shared experience. That's what "we" is made of.

Remember: "us against the problem" is always stronger than "me against you."

Why we're together

need N°17 · "shared meaning and purpose"

Everything is "right" with them: the mortgage gets paid, the kids are fed, the vacation is on schedule. And then one evening someone asks: "hey, where are we actually heading? what's all this for?" — and silence hangs. A team, it seems. Only it's unclear what game we're

playing.

Above the level of "we're a team" (that was the previous lesson, №16) there's one more, the very top floor — **shared meaning**: common values, traditions, a sense of "what are we building together, and why." John Gottman, in his model of strong relationships, places "creating shared meaning" at the very summit: couples who consciously build it — start their own rituals, set common goals, answer each other's questions of "what is family to us?", "where are we going?" — don't just survive, they thrive.¹⁵⁰ A shared purpose cements a union more firmly than any household routine.

Warning signs. Life has come down to an endless to-do list. The feeling of "we're like roommates running a shared household." No shared dreams, traditions, "ours." From the outside everything is a success — and inside it's empty.

What to do. - Start rituals that are only yours: how you greet the morning, how you celebrate, little traditions — out of them "our story" is composed. - Say it out loud: where are we going, what matters to us, what are we building together. - Support each other's dreams and roles as part of a shared project, not as "yours, separately."

Remember: "team" answers the question "how do we survive together." Shared meaning answers "why are we together." Without the second, even a very successful couple feels emptiness.

Breathing in a couple

need №18 · "freedom"

She loves to paint and sometimes slips away for a couple of hours into her sketch. He isn't jealous and isn't hurt — he respects it. On Fridays he plays soccer with friends — she's all for it. And, oddly enough, after time apart they're drawn to each other more strongly, and they have something to share.

Freedom is the right to stay yourself within a couple: your own interests, friends, time for yourself, an opinion without fear. This isn't the opposite of closeness but its condition. In psychology, autonomy is placed among the top three basic human needs.¹⁶ And here's the paradox: when people aren't smothered, they meet each other halfway more willingly — a sense of freedom raises both satisfaction and closeness.⁸⁸ And acts done "for us" of one's

own free will, not under duress, warm far more strongly.⁹⁰ Gottman noticed: happy couples know how to accept each other's pursuits even without sharing them, and don't try to control everything.¹¹¹

But — and this matters — **freedom does not equal anything-goes**. Autonomy in psychology means "I act of my own will," not "I do whatever I want without regard for us."⁸⁹ Health lies in *balance*: both room for each person and care for "we." If one of you vanishes night after night with friends at a casino, and the other is out till morning at a club, both feel uncomfortable — and that's a normal reaction, not "being a killjoy." It's not about distrust: simply, **circumstances matter**. Research into the causes of cheating directly singles out "situational forces" — alcohol, separation, an environment with lots of "opportunities": in such conditions the risk is objectively higher — even for good people and strong couples.¹³¹

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But "protecting us" is **not** "giving up clubs and fun for the rest of your life." Bans are a poor solution; there's a much better one. Devoted partners already, without realizing it, look less at the "options" (and those who do actively look around tend to break up within a couple of months).^{129 130} But the trick isn't to *cancel* pleasure, it's to *share* it: you want to go to a club or a party — agree on it and go **together**. Then the "charged" situation turns from a risk to "us" into a shared celebration that even brings you closer — because doing something new and fun together works like a stimulant for a couple (remember the chapter on pleasure?).¹⁰¹ Personal hobbies and meetups with friends are fine apart, too; but the nighttime "charged" outings are by default more pleasant and calmer to live through together.

Where's the line between a healthy boundary and control? It's simple: **a boundary is an agreement you arrived at together and that works both ways**; control is when one of you single-handedly decides for the other. The first is respect both for freedom and for the couple; the second is about power (that was the principle "Who's at the helm"). Healthy relationships are two whole individuals who choose to be together — and protect that "together."¹³³

In the margins: and friends of the opposite sex?

Such a friendship in itself is normal, and jealousy of every interaction only does harm. But honestly: it's also a "charged" context. Attraction between friends of different sexes is a common thing (and more often on the men's side), and the friends themselves usually see it as a downside rather than a plus.¹⁵¹ Such a friendship raises the sense that "there are options around" — and that's a risk factor. It's most worrying when the friend is attractive, available, and flirty, when the friendship is new — and especially when it's **secret**.

But the main red flag isn't the fact of friendship itself, but the moment **when the friend starts to fill what the partner should be filling**: listening, supporting, sharing the innermost. Then it's no longer friendship but an emotional substitution.

The same things work: **transparency instead of secrecy, agreement, not control**, and a strong "we" where needs are met at home — then no friend is a competitor.

Warning signs. On one side — control, jealousy of hobbies and friends, accounting for every step (and in response, protest or loss of self). On the other — edges both of you turn a blind eye to: nighttime "benders," situations that leave an anxious residue of "what if something happens." Both are a signal that the balance of freedom and "we" is off.

What to do. - Support your partner's personal interests and friends — time apart is good for both. - Want something "charged" (a club, a party, a trip)? By default, do it together: more fun, and more peace of mind for "us." - Agree on boundaries *together*: what's comfortable for both — and so that the rules are symmetrical for the two of you. - Distinguish agreement from control: the first you decide together, the second one of you imposes.

Remember: freedom isn't "I'm allowed anything" and it isn't "now we're allowed nothing." You want fun — share it, don't hide it from each other.

Chapter 6. Pleasure and beauty

A relationship isn't only labor and care. It's also joy, passion, the spark. Three lessons about what makes "together" not just reliable but *desirable*.

A spark without words

need №19 · "sexual closeness"

After the baby was born, their intimate life all but vanished — there was no energy left for anything. They noticed they were drifting apart and did a simple thing: asked grandma to babysit, and arranged an evening just for the two of them. In the morning they woke up tenderer toward each other — the petty grievances had gone somewhere.

Sex isn't only about attraction but also about a language of love understood by the body: a way to feel desired and close without words. It's a powerful "glue," especially in stressful periods. And the link here isn't made up: the higher the sexual satisfaction, the higher the relationship satisfaction afterward — and precisely in that direction.^{93 94} Nature hedged with chemistry: physical closeness reinforces attachment.⁹⁶

But the main secret isn't "technique," it's conversation. Openly discussing desires and boundaries is one of the strongest factors in good sex.¹¹⁰

Warning signs. A long absence of intimacy or a sharp divergence in desire. Resentment, a sense of rejection, distancing. Often a problem in the bedroom is about tension outside it.

What to do. - Talk about desires directly and kindly. Guessing in silence is a bad strategy. - Protect "time for two" from chores and parenthood. - Build up warmth outside the bedroom — it comes back into the bedroom.

Remember: sex is a conversation between bodies; and, like any conversation, it lives where the two of you hear each other.

The vitamin of joy

need N°20 · "pleasure"

In the middle of a gray week they suddenly threw a "mini-celebration": pizza, an old favorite comedy, laughter till midnight, and memories of their student years. A few hours of silly fun — and the next day they both walked around light and cracking jokes. As if they'd recharged.

Pleasure is joy, laughter, play, shared enjoyable activities. Not "indulgence," but a vitamin without which love withers. There's even an observation: for a relationship's durability, the good has to noticeably outweigh the bad — a rough benchmark of about five to one.⁵⁵ And one more, almost magical thing: shared *new* experiences literally revive infatuation. In a classic experiment, couples who did something new and exciting together afterward rated their relationship higher — novelty spurs the same "chemistry" as at the start of a romance.¹⁰¹ And shared laughter is a glue all its own: the more you laugh together, the closer you feel.¹⁰²

Warning signs. Life has come down to chores and obligations. The two of you haven't laughed together or done anything new in ages. Your partner is associated only with "have to."

What to do. - Regularly try something new together — that's stronger than "standard" dates. - Cherish the small joys: jokes, surprises, goofing around. - Plan pleasure as seriously as you plan tasks.

Remember: a couple that laughs together and tries new things ages slower than love.

The return of beauty

need N°21 · "a sense of beauty"

He hadn't given flowers in a long time — "it's impractical, after all." But on their anniversary he suddenly brought a big bouquet and invited her to dinner, asking her to wear that one dress. She lit candles. Music, outfits, fragrance — and it was as if they saw each other anew. "How beautiful it is today... it's like I've fallen in love all over again."

Beauty is the pull toward aesthetics and romance in a shared life: to admire each other, to dress up, to create beautiful moments and a cozy home. Maslow singled out aesthetic needs as a separate, very human level.² At the start of a romance, physical beauty is a powerful "trigger," while in a long union the *shared* enjoyment of beauty comes to the fore: travel,

music, a beautiful home, dating rituals. This keeps the tone of being in love. (Who matters more for whose beauty — scientists haven't closed the debate, so don't make a cult of looks.¹⁰⁵)

Warning signs. Daily life has become purely utilitarian, romance has evaporated, you've stopped making an effort for each other. Everything is "businesslike," without celebration.

What to do. - Bring back the dating rituals: the outfit, candles, a setting that lifts you out of the everyday. - Create shared aesthetic experiences — together, not "for the sake of it." - Sustain romance as a sign of attention, not as an obligation.

Remember: beauty in a relationship isn't about perfect looks, it's about the ability, from time to time, to throw each other a celebration.

Part II. The three principles that tie it all together

You've gone through twenty-one needs. These are the "parts." But parts on their own don't drive anywhere — you need assembly. The three principles below are exactly that assembly: who steers, how not to lose your roles, and what mindset makes the whole system generous rather than transactional.

Principle 1. Who's at the helm

A familiar scene: a decision has to be made — a move, a major purchase, how to raise a child — and the couple gets stuck. Each pulls in their own direction, both take offense, the decision stalls for weeks. Know why? Because the ship has no captain.

Every stable team — a firm, a crew, even two mountaineers roped together — has the one who coordinates and, at the decisive moment, takes the final word. Not because they're "more important as a person," but because otherwise, in a storm, everyone drowns while arguing which way to row. A family is a team too. And it benefits from a clear **"captain" structure**: who's responsible for what, and who makes the final decision when opinions diverge but you can't drag it out.

A handy metaphor is **the captain and the first mate**. The captain holds the course and answers for the consequences. The first mate is an irreplaceable figure: they run a huge part of the affairs themselves, they have a full vote, and in ordinary times the ship runs on their *joint* decisions. It's just that when it storms and opinions diverge, one person says the final word — and bears responsibility for it. Historically, this coordinating-and-protecting role was more often taken on by the man.¹¹⁴

By disposition, men are on average a touch more willing to go for risk, competition, and the fight for status,¹³⁸ so the role of the one who steps toward responsibility first and "takes the helm" still often falls naturally to them today. It's not a duty and not a law — but if it's that way in your couple, there's nothing wrong with it.

And here's what science confirms about this role. Women are on average drawn to confident strength in a man — but of a particular kind. What attracts isn't pressure and isn't control, but **prestige**: the status granted for competence and respect,^{139 140} and on top of that,

paired with warmth — "strong and kind" works.¹⁴¹ Moreover, strength is good when it's aimed *outward* — at goals, at the world, at protecting one's own; that same firmness aimed at the partner herself, on the contrary, repels.¹⁴² In short: the captain who's truly strong is the one who's firm toward the world and warm toward his own.

And what turns captaincy into a strong union? The most reliable thing the long years of observing couples have given us: strongest are the ones where the husband knows how to **accept influence** from the wife, and important decisions are shared.^{111 112} That is, the captain leads by listening, not by steamrolling.

So a captain isn't the one who commands the loudest, but the one who takes on responsibility, earns respect through deeds, and stays warm. "Captain and first mate" is about **responsibility and coordination**: on most matters you decide together, and a single person's final word is a rare exception for a deadlock, when you can't drag it out. Captaincy is service to the crew, not power over it.

How to apply it. - Agree on zones: who's responsible by default for what (money, the household, children, plans). - Decide big things together; leave one person's "final word" for the rare deadlocks. - Whoever "captains" their own zone — truly listen to the other.

Remember: a captain isn't the one who commands, but the one who answers. Share the power, carry the responsibility.

Principle 2. Don't lose each other

The most common tragedy of long-term couples is a quiet, everyday one. Two people in love gradually turn into ideal co-managers of the household and excellent parents... and one day discover that the man and the woman have vanished somewhere. What's left is "who's picking up from daycare" and "did you buy the milk."

In every couple, three roles live at once:

1. **A man and a woman** — attraction, flirting, romance. This is where it all began.
2. **A husband and a wife** — partnership, the household, decisions.
3. **A mother and a father** — parenthood.

The trouble isn't the roles themselves, but the **imbalance**. Over time, "the man and the woman" usually gets crowded out by the household and especially by children — and then "the spark goes." Not because love has ended, but because the layer on which attraction

rests stopped being watered. This isn't your personal failure — it's the most documented crisis of couples: after a child is born, relationship satisfaction on average drops, and that's a normal, predictable stage.^{115 116} This is exactly why the role of "the man and the woman" has to be protected consciously.

How to apply it. - Regularly return to the role of the man and the woman: dates, flirting, romance, taking care of yourselves. - Don't let parenthood swallow the couple whole — you're partners first and foremost, and that's the best foundation for children. - Notice the imbalance: if for months you've been only "the parents" or only "the household" — it's time to fix the rest.

Remember: don't let "mom and dad" and "who'll take out the trash" crowd out those two people who once couldn't tear themselves away from each other.

Principle 3. Give, don't take

Remember the very first lesson — about the strength of giving? It's no accident that it's first, and no accident that it repeats at the end. Because it's the main mindset on which everything rests.

There are two ways to come into a relationship. The first: "what will I get out of this?" — and then the partner becomes a service provider, and love becomes barter. The second: "what can I give?" — and then you're always looking for how to delight, support, make things easier.

And here's the trick — the **paradox of reciprocity**. When *both* are set to give, both receive in full: an upward spiral of kindness kicks in. But when both keep score and wait for the other to move first — both systematically come up short. Psychologists have long distinguished "communal" relationships (I give because you need it) from "exchange" ones (I give because you owe me) — and the first bring far more happiness.^{84 85} Fromm himself considered the capacity to give the highest expression of strength, not a loss.¹²

Just one important caveat:

In the margins. "Giving" doesn't mean "dissolving" and forgetting about yourself. When a person sacrifices themselves for years, it ends in burnout and resentment — and it hits both. Healthy generosity comes from fullness, not from emptiness, and it works when *both* give. (That's why Principle 3 doesn't cancel need №18 — freedom.)

How to apply it. - Every day ask yourself: "what can I give today?" — and do at least one small thing. - Respond according to need, not according to "who owes whom." - Give from fullness: take care of yourself too, so you have something to share.

Remember: look not for "what I was shortchanged on," but for "what I can give." When both do it this way — both win.

Finale. Where all of this leads

Let's step back and look at the whole picture.

Ask anyone who's lived a long life what they regret and what, in the end, turned out to matter. Almost no one will say "I didn't earn enough" or "I didn't rise high enough." They'll talk about people: whom they loved, with whom they were close, whom they let slip away. You can chase money and status your whole life — and at the end discover that wasn't what kept you warm.

And this isn't just a pretty thought — research has been arriving at it for decades. In the most famous of these, the long-running Harvard project, the same people were observed for more than eighty years, and the conclusion came out simple, almost awkward: what makes us happiest and healthiest of all isn't income and isn't career, but the **quality of close relationships**.¹¹⁹ And loneliness and isolation, on the contrary, raise the risk of early death comparably to smoking.⁴¹

Money, meanwhile, isn't "evil": it lowers anxiety and gives a sense of security, and well-being really does rise with income — just with diminishing returns, and you can't buy closeness with it.¹²³ An important nuance about relationships themselves: what saves you isn't the marriage certificate but the *quality*. A warm marriage strengthens health, while a conflict-ridden one undermines it more than loneliness does.⁴⁸ So the point isn't to "be in a couple," it's what kind of couple it is.

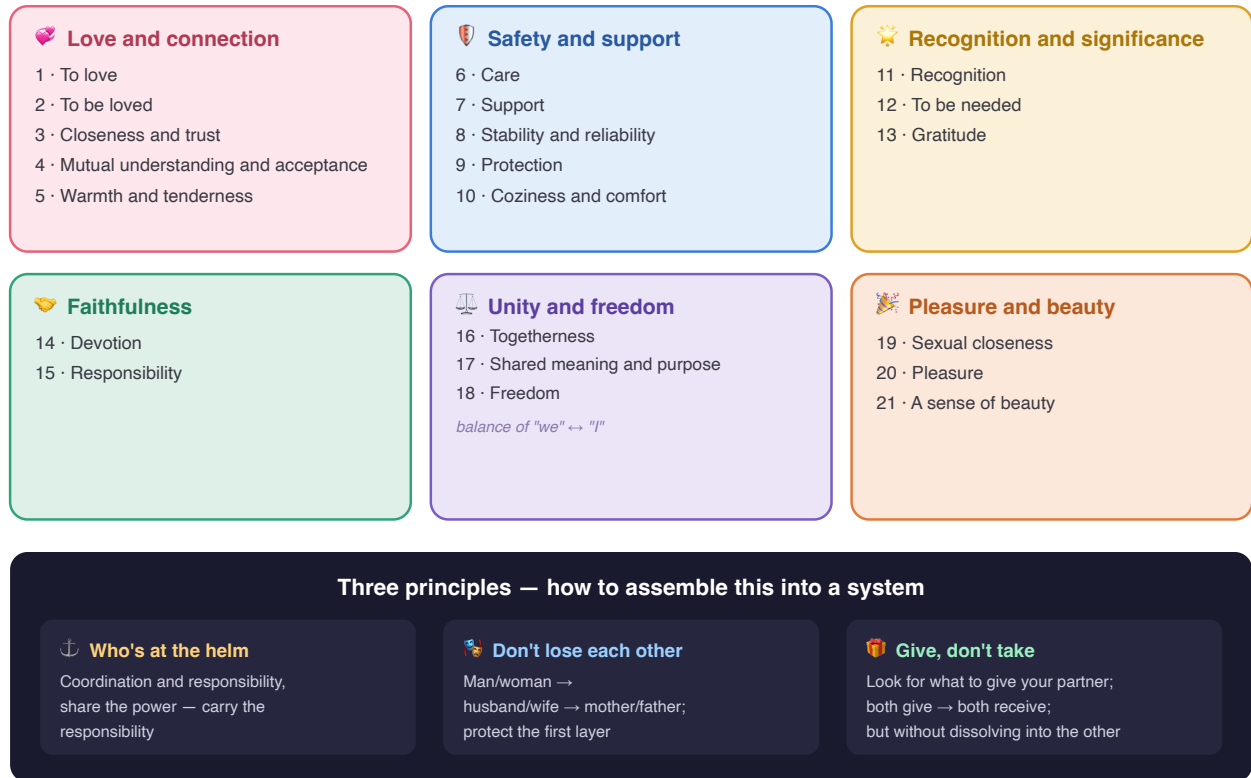
From here comes the formula the science of happiness converges on: **balance**. Don't dissolve into work at the cost of those close to you. Don't dissolve into those close to you at the cost of yourself. Guard your health, keep warm relationships, do work you love, and have ground under your feet. An imbalance in any direction sooner or later takes its revenge.

All the needs you now know are the "maintenance" of the main thing you'll have in life. Most of them, if you look closely, are about one thing: **do I feel that the person I love truly responds to me?**²⁰ To love and be loved, to be safe, needed, understood, free, desired — this isn't "wanting too much." It's simply the list of what makes "together" alive.

The good news: now you have a map. You don't have to guess what's wrong — you can look at which item is glowing red and take up exactly that one. Here it is in full — now that there's meaning behind every word:

A map: what each person needs in a couple

21 needs · 6 blocks · 3 principles



And the simplest thing you can start with this very day, you already know.

Look not for what you were shortchanged on. Look for what you can give.

How we checked the facts

This book is written breezily, but not "off the top of our heads." Behind every vivid idea stands real science — the work of recognized psychologists and neuroscientists, meta-analyses, long-term observations of thousands of couples. The little numbers in the text are references to the list below.

Two honest caveats, important for trust:

- **The psychology of relationships is an observational science.** Most often it shows a *correlation* ("warm couples have more of this") rather than ironclad causation. That's why we say "linked to" rather than "guarantees."
 - **Some fashionable claims we deliberately softened.** "Oxytocin is the trust hormone," "the 5:1 formula predicts divorce," "the man must be in charge" — all of this has either been challenged in the science or hasn't held up. Where that's so, we flagged it honestly in the margins, and we gathered the full list of sources at the end of the book.
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Glossary

Here's the plain-language version. First, the words we say from childhood but can rarely explain. Then — the scientific concepts from the book. If something along the way was unclear, look here.

Words we all say

- **Love** — not just a warm feeling but an action: to care for another, to know them, and to take responsibility for them. Feelings come and go — love is what you *do*.
- **Infatuation** — the bright early stage when a person gives you a "high": a surge of dopamine, butterflies, thoughts only of them. It usually lasts months and, with luck, grows into a calm, deep love.
- **Attachment** — the built-in pull to be near someone close and to seek protection and comfort from them. Not "dependence" in the bad sense, but a basic human need — from birth to the end.
- **Trust** — the calm certainty that someone close won't let you down or turn against you what you've revealed to them. It's assembled from a hundred small kept promises.
- **Respect** — to treat your partner as a valuable, separate person with their own opinion. Not to be confused with fear and submission.
- **Closeness (emotional)** — the sense that there's no wall between you: you can be yourself, show a weak spot, and not get hit on it.
- **Intimacy** — the same "no wall." In everyday speech it often means sex, but in psychology it's broader — about openness of the soul.
- **Passion** — physical and emotional attraction, that very "spark." One of the three pillars of love — alongside closeness and devotion.
- **Jealousy** — the anxiety of losing someone close or their attention. A signal of fear or an unmet need; in small doses it's normal, in large ones it eats away at trust.
- **Faithfulness (devotion)** — the conscious choice to stay with your person and not betray them — in easy times and in hard ones.

- **Emotional infidelity (substitution)** — when the main "close person" you entrust your feelings and innermost self to becomes not your partner but someone else. There may be no sex, but the center of gravity shifts elsewhere — and it wounds no less than physical infidelity.
- **Care** — attention to how the other is really doing, and the readiness to lend a shoulder. It works when it hits on what the person truly needs.
- **Tenderness** — soft warmth: hugs, touches, gentle words, a kind tone. The language of love without words.
- **Vulnerability** — daring to show your real self (fears, weaknesses, feelings), risking being misunderstood. Without it there's no closeness.
- **Empathy** — the ability to feel what another is going through, to put yourself in their place — not necessarily agreeing.
- **Acceptance** — when you're seen with all your flaws and no one tries to remake you. It's not "I approve of everything": you can accept a person and not agree with an action.
- **Boundaries** — your personal "can and can't" that you communicate. Healthy boundaries are an agreement arrived at together, not one person's control over another.
- **Compromise** — a solution where each gives something up so that "we" wins.
- **Gratitude** — to notice the good your partner does and speak of it, rather than take it as a given.
- **Freedom (autonomy)** — the right to stay yourself within a couple: your own interests, opinions, time. It's "I act of my own will," not "I do whatever I want without regard for us."

Scientific concepts from the book

- **Attachment style** — your "handwriting" in closeness. *Secure* — comfortable both growing close and being separate. *Anxious* — fear of being abandoned, a need for reassurance. *Avoidant* — too-tight closeness feels stifling. Not a life sentence: it changes in a secure relationship.
- **Safe haven / base** — two roles of a partner: the "haven" is where you return for comfort in a storm; the "base" is the support from which you're not afraid to head into the world and grow.

- **Partner responsiveness** — the sense of "I'm seen, understood, and valued." The main "common denominator" of strong relationships.
- **Mattering** — the feeling that you matter; that without you the other person would be worse off.
- **Capitalization** — when a partner sincerely rejoices in your wins along with you. Support in joy binds more strongly than support in trouble.
- **We-ness** — the habit of thinking and speaking of the couple as a team, "we," rather than "I" and "you."
- **Communal vs. exchange relationships** — care "according to need" ("you need it, I'll do it") versus the barter of "you to me, me to you." The first makes a couple happier.
- **Prestige vs. dominance** — two paths to authority: *prestige* — respect granted for competence; *dominance* — power through force and fear. The first is the one that's attractive and good for a couple.
- **The Michelangelo effect** — when a close person helps you become the best version of yourself, "carving" it out the way a sculptor does from stone.
- **Self-expansion** — growth through a relationship: beside your partner you learn new things, try things, become "bigger."
- **Tend-and-befriend** — a common reaction to stress (especially in women): not "fight or flight," but protecting those close and leaning on your own people.
- **Broaden-and-build** — joy and positivity aren't just pleasant: they broaden your horizons and store up a couple's resources for the future.
- **Pair bonding** — the biological "gluing" of two people: closeness and sex are reinforced by brain chemistry that holds the couple together.
- **"One demands — the other withdraws"** — a common destructive scenario in a fight: one presses with a grievance, the other shuts down and retreats into silence. The harsher it is, the worse for both.
- **Oxytocin** — a hormone released during warmth, touch, and closeness that helps you calm down. It's popularly called "the attachment hormone" — but the link is more complex than the headlines.
- **Codependency** — when a person dissolves into their partner and their problems, forgetting about themselves. It's not "strong love" but an imbalance that, in the long run, harms both.

- **Hedonic adaptation** — getting used to things: you quickly get used to the good and stop noticing it. That's why joy and novelty in a couple have to be renewed.

A map: what each person needs in a couple

21 needs · 6 blocks · 3 principles

Love and connection

- 1 · To love
- 2 · To be loved
- 3 · Closeness and trust
- 4 · Mutual understanding and acceptance
- 5 · Warmth and tenderness

Safety and support

- 6 · Care
- 7 · Support
- 8 · Stability and reliability
- 9 · Protection
- 10 · Coziness and comfort

Recognition and significance

- 11 · Recognition
- 12 · To be needed
- 13 · Gratitude

Faithfulness

- 14 · Devotion
- 15 · Responsibility

Unity and freedom

- 16 · Togetherness
- 17 · Shared meaning and purpose
- 18 · Freedom

balance of "we" ↔ "I"

Pleasure and beauty

- 19 · Sexual closeness
- 20 · Pleasure
- 21 · A sense of beauty

Three principles — how to assemble this into a system

Who's at the helm

Coordination and responsibility,
share the power — carry the
responsibility

Don't lose each other

Man/woman →
husband/wife → mother/father;
protect the first layer

Give, don't take

Look for what to give your partner;
both give → both receive;
but without dissolving into the other