



VOLUME 01 · COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS

A PREMIUM OPERATING MANUAL

RULES OF RE-ENGAGEMENT

*A structured communication recovery system for
rebuilding understanding, safety, and connection
after conflict.*

ABOUT

A structured communication recovery system for rebuilding understanding, safety, and connection after conflict.

EDITION

Volume 01
Communication Systems

*“A protocol for the
moment after a
conversation has gone
wrong.”*

Intelligence Wealth &
Health

PREMIUM OPERATING
MANUAL

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INTELLIGENCE WEALTH & HEALTH



ORIENTATION

This manual is modular. Read it once cover to cover. After that, return to whichever section the conversation needs.

TIME TO READ

60 to 90 minutes for the first pass. Two minutes per section under pressure.

“Read once when calm. Return to under pressure.”

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HOW TO USE

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HOW TO USE

CONTENTS & ENTRY POINTS

*Read Part I once when calm. Keep the **Emergency Sheet** and **One-Page Summary** visible. Return to Part II one rule at a time.*

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THE MAP

One diagram. The arc of every rupture, and the arc of every repair. Memorise this and the manual is already half-known.

USE

Read once. Reference under pressure. The phase names are the working language.

“Six states. Four phases. One arc.”

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THE SYSTEM MAP

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THE SYSTEM MAP

RUPTURE · REGULATE · UNDERSTAND ·
OWN · REPAIR · RETURN

01	02	03	04	05	06
RUPTURE	REGULATE	UNDERSTAND	OWN	REPAIR	RETURN
Something breaks. Body activates. Words start to land badly.	Return the body. Slow exhale. Settle before speaking.	Hear the other. Reflect the feeling. Find the real issue.	Claim your part. One specific thing. No qualifiers.	Make the move. Reassure the bond. Close the loop.	Back to baseline. Stronger pattern. Faster next time.

*The 12 Rules govern how you move between these six states.
The four phases are the working protocol. The Emergency Sheet is the express version.*

THE FOUR-PHASE REPAIR PROTOCOL

PHASE 01 Regulate Return both nervous systems to a state where conversation is biologically possible. 5-10 minutes.	PHASE 02 Understand Each person experiences being heard before any solution is attempted. 10-15 minutes.
PHASE 03 Own Each person names their own contribution to the rupture. 10-15 minutes.	PHASE 04 Repair Make the explicit repair move. Reaffirm the bond. Close the loop. 10-15 minutes.

RULES OF RE-ENGAGEMENT

THE SYSTEM MAP



ORIENTATION

Before the rules, the protocol, the scripts. The aim of every move in this manual.

READ FIRST

Return here whenever the protocol starts to feel mechanical.

“The work of relationships is not the absence of rupture. It is the quality of the repair.”

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REMEMBER THE AIM

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REMEMBER THE AIM

WHAT WE ARE ACTUALLY TRYING TO DO

THE AIM IS NOT TO WIN

- To reconnect
- To understand
- To resolve
- To practice better repair skills
- To preserve the bond
- To exit the loop

STICK TO ONE TOPIC

One issue, fully addressed, is worth more than five raised and dropped. Stacking grievances is how repair becomes impossible.

ENGAGEMENT

Seek understanding before defence. Listen for the feeling, not only the facts. The facts are usually the costume.

TWO TRUTHS CAN EXIST AT ONCE

Both people can be partially right and partially hurt. Validation is not the same as agreement. Hearing someone is not surrender.

RESPOND, DO NOT REACT — REMAIN CALM

Regulate the body before you open the mouth. The first response is rarely the real one. Three breaths is enough to find it.

YOU CAN ALWAYS COME BACK

Take a breather. Create space. Recalibrate. Self-regulate. Then return. Leaving the room is not abandoning the conversation.

THE BOND IS NOT THE DISAGREEMENT

You are not arguing about the dishes. You are arguing about whether the bond is safe. The bond is the priority. Everything else is downstream of it.



SECTION

The 12 operating rules that protect emotional safety while two people find their way back to each other.

USE

Read once when calm. Return to under pressure. Print and keep visible.

“The point is not to perform restraint. It is to preserve the conditions under which the other person can still hear you.”

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COMMUNICATION
SYSTEMS · VOL 01

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THE 12 RULES

FOR RE-ENTERING THE CONVERSATION

01 · REGULATE BEFORE YOU RESPOND

A flooded body cannot listen, only defend. Settle first.

02 · PAUSE BEFORE YOU REACT

The first response is rarely your real one. Three breaths is enough to find it.

03 · SEEK UNDERSTANDING BEFORE DEFENCE

Defending before understanding makes the other person feel unseen. The conversation loops.

04 · NO INTERRUPTING

Interrupting tells the other person their experience matters less than your reaction to it.

05 · NO INSULTS OR CHARACTER ATTACKS

Naming a behaviour is repair. Naming the person as the problem is damage.

06 · NO SARCASM DURING REPAIR

Sarcasm is contempt with deniability. It is among the strongest predictors of relational decay.

07 · NO WEAPONISING VULNERABILITY

What was shared in trust is not ammunition. Once used as such, openness disappears.

08 · NO HISTORICAL SCOREKEEPING

Pulling the past into the present makes the present unresolvable.

09 · NO THREATS OF LEAVING OR ABANDONING

Even unmeant, the other person's body stores the threat. The damage is cumulative.

10 · CLARIFY BEFORE YOU ASSUME

Most arguments are about a story one person built, not the actual event.

11 · HOLD ONE ISSUE AT A TIME

Stacked grievances overwhelm the conversation. Resolution becomes impossible.

12 · REPAIR IS THE GOAL — NOT WINNING

Every move is repair-orientated or victory-orientated. Choose one.

→ FURTHER READING

*Each of these twelve rules is examined in depth in **Part II — The Psychology Behind the Rules**, found at the back of this document.*



PHASE

First of four. Returns both nervous systems to a state where conversation is biologically possible.

DURATION

5 to 10 minutes minimum. Stay longer if needed.

"The first job is not to be understood. The first job is to come back into the body where understanding is even possible."

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THE REPAIR PROTOCOL

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PHASE 01

REGULATE · 5-10 MINUTES

OBJECTIVE

Return both nervous systems to a state where conversation is biologically possible.

STEP 01 · PAUSE AND NAME THE STATE

Mark out loud that something has tipped. The point is not to discuss the issue. It is to enter repair mode together.

"I want to stay in this with you. I need a few minutes to settle before I can talk well. I will come back."

STEP 02 · DOWNREGULATE THE BODY

Separate physically if needed. Do something that lengthens the exhale. Two minutes of slow nasal breathing. A short walk. Cold water on the wrists. Heart rate down. Jaw unclenched.

STEP 03 · IDENTIFY YOUR EMOTIONAL STATE

- What am I feeling, in one word?
- What is the feeling underneath that one?
- What is the fear underneath that?

STEP 04 · TAKE EMOTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Whatever you are feeling, it is yours to manage. The other person did not place it inside you. They may have triggered it. They are not responsible for regulating it.

EXIT CRITERIA

Breathing slowed. You can name what you feel without escalating. You can hold the other person in your mind without contempt. If any are missing, stay longer.



PHASE

Second of four. Each person experiences being heard before any solution is attempted.

DURATION

10 to 15 minutes. Take it slow.

"You are not arguing about the dishes. You are arguing about whether the bond is safe."

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THE REPAIR PROTOCOL

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PHASE 02

UNDERSTAND · 10-15 MINUTES

OBJECTIVE

Each person experiences being genuinely heard before any solution is attempted.

STEP 01 · ONE SPEAKER, ONE LISTENER

Decide who speaks first. The other person's only job is to listen, not to prepare a reply. No interruption. No facial reactions designed to influence.

STEP 02 · SPEAK FROM YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE

Use the structure: *"When X happened, I felt Y, because the story I told myself was Z."*

"When you went quiet during dinner, I felt unimportant, because the story I told myself was that you had checked out of the conversation."

STEP 03 · REFLECT BEFORE YOU RESPOND

The listener reflects back the feeling, in their own words, before defending or explaining.

"What I am hearing is that you felt unimportant, and the silence read like I had stopped caring. Is that close?"

STEP 04 · FIND THE UNDERLYING ISSUE

Most surface arguments are about something else. Underneath, almost always: *I do not feel valued, safe, chosen, or seen.*

STEP 05 · SWITCH ROLES

Now the second person speaks. Same structure. Same listening. Both people get the experience of being heard.

RULES OF RE-ENGAGEMENT

PHASE 02 · UNDERSTAND



PHASE

Third of four. Each person identifies their share of the dynamic and validates the impact on the other.

DURATION

10 to 15 minutes. Honest, specific, no qualifiers.

"Validation is not agreement. It is acknowledgement that your action landed in the other person in a particular way."

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THE REPAIR PROTOCOL

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PHASE 03

OWN • 10-15 MINUTES

OBJECTIVE

Identify your share of the dynamic. Validate the impact on the other person without condition.

STEP 01 • IDENTIFY YOUR CONTRIBUTION

- What did I do that made this harder?
- Where did I escalate when I could have de-escalated?
- What did I refuse to look at?

STEP 02 • VALIDATE THE IMPACT

You can validate impact without conceding intent.

"I can see that what I did made you feel dismissed. That makes sense. I would feel the same in that position."

STEP 03 • APOLOGISE FOR THE SPECIFIC THING

AVOID

"I'm sorry you feel that way."

USE INSTEAD

"I'm sorry I cut you off. I can see how that made you feel like your view did not matter, and that is exactly the opposite of what I want."

STEP 04 • LOWER THE DEFENSIVE POSTURE

Notice the urge to defend. Choose curiosity instead. *What is the other person trying to protect right now? What do they need to know is true?*

RULES OF RE-ENGAGEMENT

PHASE 03 • OWN



PHASE

Fourth of four. Rebuild emotional safety, agree what each person needs, re-establish the bond.

DURATION

10 to 20 minutes. Close the loop deliberately.

“A repair attempt is any small move that signals: I am still on your side.”

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THE REPAIR PROTOCOL

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PHASE 04

REPAIR & RECONNECTION • 10-20 MINUTES

OBJECTIVE

Rebuild emotional safety. Agree what each person needs going forward. Re-establish the bond.

STEP 01 • MAKE A REPAIR ATTEMPT

A small move that signals: *I am still on your side*. A softened tone. A hand offered. A short, sincere line.

“I do not want to keep doing this with you. I want us to figure this out.”

STEP 02 • REASSURE THE BOND

Conflict creates uncertainty about the relationship itself. Naming the bond explicitly settles the body faster than logic.

“This argument does not change how I feel about you. We are still the same team.”

STEP 03 • CLARIFY THE REAL NEED

- “I need you to tell me when you are pulling away, so I know it is not about us.”
- “I need a few minutes after work before deep conversations.”
- “I need to be told when something I did landed badly, not a week later.”

STEP 04 • BUILD A SMALL, CONCRETE AGREEMENT

One or two specific things you will both do differently the next time this dynamic appears. Write them down if it helps.

STEP 05 • CLOSE THE LOOP

Mark the end of the repair. Not a celebration. An acknowledgement.

“Thank you for staying in this with me.”



SECTION

Working language for the moments where the wrong sentence costs the most.

HOW TO USE

Starting structures, not lines to recite. Match the script to the body that says it.

“The right sentence in the wrong tone is still the wrong sentence.”

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COMMUNICATION SCRIPTS

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SCRIPTS

WHAT TO SAY · WHAT NOT TO SAY ·
WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD

WHEN YOU ARE ABOUT TO SHUT DOWN

AVOID

"Forget it. It does not matter."

USE INSTEAD

"I can feel myself starting to shut down. I am not leaving the conversation. I just need a few minutes to come back to it."

WHEN THE ARGUMENT IS ESCALATING

AVOID

"You always do this."

USE INSTEAD

"We are starting to lose each other. Can we slow down? I do not want to keep going in this direction."

WHEN YOU FEEL ANXIOUS ABOUT THE CONNECTION

AVOID

"You do not even care about me anymore."

USE INSTEAD

"I am noticing I feel anxious about us right now. I am not asking you to fix it. I just wanted you to know."

WHEN YOU NEED TO APOLOGISE PROPERLY

AVOID

"I am sorry, but you also..."

USE INSTEAD

"I was wrong about how I spoke to you. I can see why it landed the way it did. I am sorry."

WHEN YOU WANT TO RECONNECT AFTER DISTANCE

AVOID

"So... are we okay or not?"

USE INSTEAD

"I have been thinking about us. I do not want distance to be the answer. Can we sit down and talk?"



SECTION

The body of the person speaking decides whether the body of the person listening can hear them.

CO-REGULATION

Two nervous systems in proximity influence each other. When one settles, the other follows.

“You do not have to perform calm. You do have to be aware of what you are transmitting.”

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BODY & NERVOUS SYSTEM

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THE BODY

SAFETY SIGNALS & CO-REGULATION

SIGNALS THAT ESCALATE

- Crossed arms, turned-away torso, widening physical distance
- Raised volume, sharp pitch, clipped pace
- Hard eye contact with a fixed jaw, or eye contact that disappears entirely
- Eye-rolling, sighing, the small movements that signal contempt
- Pointing, finger-jabbing, leaning forward into the other person's space
- A face that has gone flat, expressionless, switched off

SIGNALS THAT RESTORE SAFETY

- Slower exhale than inhale — the other body will mirror it
- Soft eye contact, broken naturally, returned without challenge
- Open palms, relaxed shoulders, weight settled rather than coiled
- Lower volume than the moment before
- A single step closer, only when invited
- A face that registers what the other person is saying, even slightly

CO-REGULATION

Settle yourself first. The room follows. If you walk in already activated, your body will pull theirs up to meet it, regardless of your words.

VOICE AS INSTRUMENT

Drop the volume by twenty percent. Slow the pace. Lower the pitch slightly at the end of sentences instead of raising it. Speak with the breath, not against it.

PRACTICAL CHECK · BEFORE YOU SPEAK

Where is my breath? Where are my shoulders? What is my face doing? Adjust all three before you open your mouth.



SECTION

Text strips out tone, timing, and body. The worst possible medium for repair, the most commonly used.

RULE OF THE PHONE

If the thread has crossed three messages of escalating tension, stop. Pick up the phone or wait until you can speak in person.

"No serious repair has ever been completed by text. Many have been completed despite text."

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TEXT MESSAGE
PROTOCOLS

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ON THE PHONE

TEXT MESSAGE RECOVERY PROTOCOLS

THREE RULES UNDER PRESSURE

- Never resolve a serious conflict by text. Use it to hold the connection until you can speak.
- Read every message twice before sending — once for accuracy, once for tone.
- If you would not say it to their face, do not send it.

AFTER A FIGHT, BEFORE YOU HAVE SPOKEN

"I have been thinking about earlier. I do not want to leave it like that. Can we talk tonight when you are home?"

WHEN YOU NEED SPACE WITHOUT ABANDONING

"I need a little time to think clearly. I am not going anywhere. I will reach out by [time] so we can keep talking."

A REPAIR ATTEMPT MID-THREAD

"This is starting to feel like it is getting away from us. Can we pause the messages and talk on the phone instead?"

RECONNECTING AFTER DISTANCE

"I have missed you this week. I do not want the silence between us to keep growing. Can we find time soon?"

MESSAGES THAT QUIETLY DESTROY

- The single-word reply — "Fine." "Whatever." "K."
- The ultimatum — "If you do not reply right now..."
- The score-keeper — "Like you did last weekend, and the weekend before that."
- The contempt message — "Wow. Unbelievable."
- The performative silence — read receipts on, no reply, for hours.
- The screenshot threat — shared messages, sent back, weaponised.



SECTION

Most distress patterns were learned before there were words for them. Naming them is the first step in changing them.

THE LOOP

Most pairs do not have many fights. They have one fight, in many costumes.

*“Name the pattern.
Then you can interrupt it.*

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PATTERNS & ATTACHMENT

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PATTERNS

ATTACHMENT & EMOTIONAL DYNAMICS

ANXIOUS PATTERNS

Organised around the fear of disconnection. Pursue, clarify, reassure-seeking, escalate volume, become hypervigilant. **Helps:** explicit reassurance, predictable response times, calmly naming the relationship status mid-conflict.

AVOIDANT PATTERNS

Organised around the fear of being overwhelmed or controlled. Withdraw, minimise, change the subject, shut down. **Helps:** explicit pause windows with a return time, smaller doses of conversation, permission to think.

EMOTIONAL SHUTDOWN

Not a choice — a freeze response. Face goes flat. Words disappear. The person inside is more overwhelmed, not less. **Helps:** lower volume, slower pace, proximity without demand, signal that the conversation will resume later.

PROTEST BEHAVIOUR

The loud, dramatic, sometimes punishing attempt to provoke a response from someone pulling away. Almost always a signal of an unmet need for reassurance.

EMOTIONAL FLOODING

The body has crossed its conversational capacity. Anything said in this state will be remembered. Almost none of it will be true. **Helps:** stop talking. Separate. Return after twenty minutes minimum.

THE CONFLICT LOOP

One pursues, one withdraws. One escalates, one goes flat. One asks for reassurance, the other reads the asking as attack. The first move out of the loop is naming it together when calm.



PRIVATE WORK

Six short worksheets to convert the experience into clarity before the next conversation.

HOW TO USE

Write by hand if possible. One worksheet at a time. Bring two or three insights into the next conversation, calmly.

“The aim is not to read your worksheet aloud. It is to enter the room with clarity instead of charge.”

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REFLECTION ·
WORKSHEETS 1-3

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REFLECTION

PRIVATE PROMPTS · WORKSHEETS 1-3

WORKSHEET 01

NERVOUS SYSTEM CHECK-IN

- Where is my body right now? Tense, tired, numb, buzzing?
- On a scale of 0 to 10, how regulated do I feel?
- What did I need physically, before this conversation, that I did not give myself?
- What is one thing I can do in the next sixty seconds to settle?

WORKSHEET 02

WHAT WAS I ACTUALLY FEELING?

- What did I feel on the surface?
- What was the feeling underneath that one?
- What was the fear underneath that?
- What was I most afraid was happening or true?

WORKSHEET 03

WHAT WAS I TRYING TO PROTECT?

- What part of me did I feel I was defending?
- What story was I telling myself about what they meant?
- Is there another story I have not considered?
- What would change if the other story were the true one?

RULES OF RE-ENGAGEMENT

REFLECTION · 1-3



PRIVATE WORK

Worksheets four to six. These move from understanding what happened to deciding what changes next.

HOW TO USE

Complete worksheet six before the re-entry conversation. The other person does not need to see it. You do.

“Own one specific thing. No qualifiers.”

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REFLECTION ·
WORKSHEETS 4-6

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REFLECTION

PRIVATE PROMPTS · WORKSHEETS 4-6

WORKSHEET 04 ACCOUNTABILITY

- What did I do that made the conversation harder?
- Where could I have paused but did not?
- What would I do differently if I could rewind ten minutes?
- What is one thing I owe an honest apology for, without qualifier?

WORKSHEET 05 NEEDS GOING FORWARD

- What do I actually need from the other person — in behaviours, not feelings?
- What am I willing to offer in return?
- What is one specific thing I will do differently next time?
- What is one specific thing I will ask for next time?

WORKSHEET 06 RE-ENTRY PLAN

- What is the first sentence I want to lead with?
- What state do I need my body in before I speak it?
- What is the smallest, most honest repair move I can make in the first minute?
- If the conversation goes sideways again, what is my pause word?

RULES OF RE-ENGAGEMENT

REFLECTION · 4-6



THE SUMMARY

The 12 Rules and the four-phase arc on one page. Print it. Stick it on the inside of a wardrobe door.

USE

Give it to a partner who will not read a manual. Read it before walking back into the room.

“Print this page. Keep it where you can see it.”

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THE ONE-PAGE SUMMARY

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THE SUMMARY

THE 12 RULES & THE FOUR-PHASE ARC · ONE PAGE

01 REGULATE BEFORE YOU RESPOND	02 PAUSE BEFORE YOU REACT
03 SEEK UNDERSTANDING BEFORE DEFENCE	04 NO INTERRUPTING
05 NO INSULTS OR CHARACTER ATTACKS	06 NO SARCASM DURING REPAIR
07 NO WEAPONISING VULNERABILITY	08 NO HISTORICAL SCOREKEEPING
09 NO THREATS OF LEAVING	10 CLARIFY BEFORE YOU ASSUME
11 HOLD ONE ISSUE AT A TIME	12 REPAIR, NOT WINNING

PHASE 01	PHASE 02	PHASE 03	PHASE 04
REGULATE	UNDERSTAND	OWN	REPAIR

THE AIM, RESTATED

Every move is repair-orientated or victory-orientated. Choose repair.

THE FIVE THINGS TO REMEMBER UNDER PRESSURE

- Settle the body before you open the mouth.
- Reflect the feeling before you defend the facts.
- Own one specific thing. No qualifiers. No *but*.
- Reassure the bond out loud. The body needs to hear it.
- Mark the end of the repair. Conversations need a close.



SECTION

The page you reach for in the middle of a rupture. Print it. Keep it visible.

REMINDERS

You are not trying to win. You are trying to return. The bond is not the disagreement. Protect the bond.

“The 9-step protocol when there is no time to think.”

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EMERGENCY SHEET

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EMERGENCY

RAPID REPAIR PROTOCOL · WHEN IT HAS JUST GONE WRONG

- 01 STOP.** Notice the conversation has flooded. Say so. *“I need a few minutes. I will come back.”*
- 02 SEPARATE.** Different room. Outside if possible. No phones. No replaying the argument in your head.
- 03 BREATHE.** Slow exhales, longer than your inhales, for two minutes. Drop the shoulders. Unclench the jaw.
- 04 NAME IT.** What am I actually feeling underneath the anger? What am I afraid is true?
- 05 RETURN.** Walk back with a softer body. Lower volume. Open posture. *“I want to try this again.”*
- 06 LISTEN FIRST.** Let the other person speak. Reflect back the feeling, not the facts, before you respond.
- 07 OWN ONE THING.** Name one specific thing you contributed to the rupture. No qualifiers. No “but”.
- 08 REASSURE THE BOND.** Say it explicitly. *“This does not change us. We are still the same team.”*
- 09 CLOSE THE LOOP.** Mark the end of the repair. *“Thank you for staying in this with me.”*

NEXT →

Part II — The Psychology Behind the Rules — begins on the next page. Read it once when calm. Return to the rule that is most relevant under pressure.

RULES OF RE-ENGAGEMENT

EMERGENCY SHEET



SECTION

Part II opens the operating logic behind the rules. Each one is examined for what it protects, what it costs to break, and what it makes possible when honoured.

FOCUS

Read once when calm. Return to the rule that is most relevant under pressure.

*“One rule per page.
Read in any order.
Return as needed.”*

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PART II · BEHAVIOURAL
OPERATING MANUAL

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PART II

The Psychology Behind the Rules

The 12 rules in Part I are the operating commands. This section is the underlying logic. Each rule is examined here for what it protects, what breaks when it is ignored, and what becomes possible when it is honoured over time.

A rule followed without understanding rarely survives the second hard conversation. A rule understood is something you can return to in the room. Part II is the reasoning behind each of the twelve rules, written so it can be read one page at a time.

Each of the next twelve pages takes one rule and works through six fixed sections: why it exists, what breaks when it is ignored, what becomes possible when it is honoured, a paired example of healthy and unhealthy expression, a short common-mistake or repair-opportunity callout, and a small set of reflection prompts. Each page closes with a named reference.

Repair is a sequence. Most people were taught the words, not the order.

HOW TO READ THIS SECTION

- Use it slowly. One rule at a time, when calm, between conversations.
- Return to a specific rule after a difficult exchange to understand what just happened.
- The references are optional. They name the source, not a syllabus.
- None of this is therapy. Most of it is what good therapists teach in the first three sessions.



SECTION

Rule 01 — the foundational rule.
All other rules depend on this
one being honoured first.

FOCUS

Nervous system regulation. The
biology of repair.

*“A flooded body
cannot listen. It can
only defend.”*

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THE PSYCHOLOGY BEHIND
THE RULES

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RULE 01

REGULATE BEFORE YOU RESPOND · THE
BODY ALWAYS SPEAKS FIRST

WHY THIS RULE EXISTS

Under perceived threat, the autonomic nervous system shifts into sympathetic activation. Heart rate climbs, breathing shortens, the prefrontal cortex narrows. Listening becomes biologically secondary to defence. Speaking from a flooded body produces words shaped by survival, not by truth. This rule restores access to the thinking mind before the mouth opens.

WHEN THE RULE IS BROKEN

- Words spoken under flooding lodge in the other person's body and are remembered for years.
- Both parties activate further, locking the conversation into pursuit-and-defend loops.
- Repair becomes harder with each successive activated exchange.
- The argument outlives the issue that started it.

WHEN THE RULE IS HONoured

- The conversation has access to clarity, not only urgency.
- Both nervous systems begin to settle through co-regulation.
- The real issue surfaces, instead of the protective version of it.
- Each repair gets faster as the pattern becomes familiar.

HEALTHY VS UNHEALTHY

AVOID

*"I just need to say this right
now."*

USE INSTEAD

*"I need ten minutes. I am not
leaving the conversation."*

COMMON MISTAKE

*Mistaking urgency for importance. Almost nothing said under
flooding is what you actually meant.*

REFLECTION

- Where in my body do I notice the activation first?
- What is one thing I can do in the next sixty seconds to settle?
- What is the cost of speaking before I am ready?

FURTHER UNDERSTANDING

Polyvagal theory · Stephen Porges.
Emotional flooding · John Gottman.



SECTION

Rule 02. Builds directly on Rule 01.

FOCUS

Interrupting the reactive loop.
The cost of speed under pressure.

"The first response is the one your defences supplied. The real one comes a few breaths later."

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THE PSYCHOLOGY BEHIND THE RULES

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RULE 02

PAUSE BEFORE YOU REACT · THE FIRST RESPONSE IS RARELY THE REAL ONE

WHY THIS RULE EXISTS

Between stimulus and response is a small window where the considered self can step in. The first response is usually the one your defences supplied automatically. Three breaths is often enough to reach the response your wiser self would actually choose. The pause is not avoidance. It is the difference between speaking and reacting.

WHEN THE RULE IS BROKEN

- Reactive responses calcify into recurring fights with no resolution.
- Both people respond to scripts written by old fears, not the present moment.
- The conversation becomes about the reaction, not the original content.
- Trust erodes that this person can hold their own reactions in real time.

WHEN THE RULE IS HONOURED

- Words become more accurate to what is actually true.
- The other person feels safer offering difficult information.
- Misunderstandings collapse before they have time to grow.
- The relationship learns it can hold pressure without breaking.

HEALTHY VS UNHEALTHY

AVOID

"Snapping back the moment something lands wrong."

USE INSTEAD

"Let me sit with that for a second before I answer."

REPAIR OPPORTUNITY

The pause itself is a repair attempt. It tells the other person that you are choosing them over your reflex.

REFLECTION

- What is my first reactive impulse, and where does it come from?
- Whose voice am I hearing in that reaction?
- What would the considered version of me say instead?

FURTHER UNDERSTANDING

The space between stimulus and response · Viktor Frankl. Cognitive distancing · DBT.



SECTION

Rule 03. The most counter-intuitive rule of the twelve.

FOCUS

Being understood is a precondition for letting go.

"You cannot reason someone out of a feeling they have not been allowed to feel."

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RULE 03

SEEK UNDERSTANDING BEFORE DEFENCE ·
PEOPLE DO NOT LET GO OF AN ISSUE UNTIL
THEY FEEL HEARD

WHY THIS RULE EXISTS

Under threat, the instinct is to explain yourself. The repair-orientated move is to first understand what the other person is communicating underneath their delivery. People do not feel heard until they have been understood, and they will not let go of an issue until they feel heard. Defending too early signals that your protection matters more than their experience.

WHEN THE RULE IS BROKEN

- The other person feels invisible, then escalates the volume to be seen.
- The conversation loops on the same point because resolution requires being heard first.
- Resentment compounds beneath the surface of arguments that appear resolved.
- One person becomes the pursuer, the other the wall.

WHEN THE RULE IS HONOURED

- The other person settles, often without needing the explanation you were preparing.
- The real issue underneath the surface complaint becomes visible.
- Both people experience being on the same side.
- Resolution becomes possible because nothing is being defended against.

HEALTHY VS UNHEALTHY

AVOID

"But that is not what I meant
— let me explain."

USE INSTEAD

"Tell me more about what
that was like for you."

COMMON MISTAKE

Confusing explanation with understanding. Explaining yourself does not make the other person feel met. Understanding them does.

REFLECTION

- What am I most defending right now?
- If I let go of being right, what becomes possible?
- What does the other person need to know that I have actually understood?

FURTHER UNDERSTANDING

Active listening · Carl Rogers. The four horsemen and antidotes · Gottman.



SECTION

Rule 04. Small in form, large in cumulative effect.

FOCUS

Floor-holding behaviour. The architecture of dialogue.

“Letting someone finish is not patience. It is communication.”

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RULE 04

**NO INTERRUPTING · INTERRUPTING IS A
SMALL ACT OF DISMISSAL**

WHY THIS RULE EXISTS

Interrupting communicates that your reaction matters more than the other person's experience. The body of the person being interrupted registers it as a small signal of being unimportant. Repeated, it becomes the relationship's posture. Letting someone finish is one of the most generous acts of communication available, and it costs nothing.

WHEN THE RULE IS BROKEN

- The interrupted person stops sharing fully and learns to keep things back.
- The conversation becomes a contest of who can hold the floor.
- Important context goes unsaid because the speaker never reaches it.
- Both parties end frustrated that they were not actually heard.

WHEN THE RULE IS HONOURED

- The full truth of what the other person is trying to say can surface.
- Trust grows that this is a safe place to think out loud.
- The conversation becomes a dialogue rather than two parallel monologues.
- Misunderstandings drop because each person finishes their actual point.

HEALTHY VS UNHEALTHY

AVOID

*"Cutting in mid-sentence
with "Yes but —"."*

USE INSTEAD

*"Silence, presence, then "Is
there more?""*

REPAIR OPPORTUNITY

Asking "is there more?" once they pause is one of the simplest, highest-value moves in any difficult conversation.

REFLECTION

- What am I afraid will happen if I let them finish?
- What is the urge to interrupt actually trying to protect?
- What might I miss by not letting them complete the thought?

FURTHER UNDERSTANDING

Active listening · Rogers. Speaker-listener technique · Markman & Stanley.



SECTION

Rule 05. The most permanent kind of damage in a difficult conversation.

FOCUS

The line between what someone did and who someone is.

“Behaviour can be apologised for. Character attacks become memory.”

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RULE 05

**NO INSULTS OR CHARACTER ATTACKS ·
BEHAVIOUR CAN BE CHANGED. CHARACTER
LANDS PERMANENTLY**

WHY THIS RULE EXISTS

Naming a behaviour that hurt is repair work. Naming the person as the problem is damage. The body and mind store character attacks differently from criticism — they become evidence the other person carries forward into every future disagreement, often for years. Once made, they cannot be cleanly retracted.

WHEN THE RULE IS BROKEN

- The attacked person stops trying to repair and starts protecting their identity.
- Trust shifts from “we have a problem to solve” to “I am the problem”.
- The named identity becomes a wound the person revisits long after the fight.
- Future conflicts lose access to honest critique because every word carries weight.

WHEN THE RULE IS HONOURED

- Difficult feedback can land as information, not as identity threat.
- Both people stay invested in the same relational team.
- The distinction between behaviour and person remains intact.
- Repair stays possible because nothing fundamental has been said.

HEALTHY VS UNHEALTHY

AVOID

“You are selfish.”

USE INSTEAD

“What you did just now felt selfish to me, and that hurt.”

COMMON MISTAKE

Reaching for the broadest, most identity-shaped word in the moment of greatest hurt. The bigger the word, the deeper the wound, the longer the recovery.

REFLECTION

- Am I describing a behaviour or assigning a character?
- What am I actually trying to communicate beneath the label?
- How would I feel if this exact sentence was said about me?

FURTHER UNDERSTANDING

Contempt as predictor of relational decay · Gottman. Behaviour vs identity · Carol Dweck.



SECTION

Rule 06. The single most damaging tone choice in a difficult conversation.

FOCUS

Earnest speech as a precondition for repair.

“Contempt is the slowest, most reliable acid in any relationship.”

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RULE 06

NO SARCASM DURING REPAIR · SARCASM IS CONTEMPT WITH DENIABILITY

WHY THIS RULE EXISTS

Sarcasm signals that the speaker is not engaged in the conversation, only performing superiority within it. The receiver cannot respond to the actual content because the message has been wrapped in mockery. Sarcasm is among the strongest known predictors of long-term relational decay across nearly every research model that examines it.

WHEN THE RULE IS BROKEN

- The other person learns this is not a safe place to be earnest.
- Real feeling gets buried under defensive humour.
- The conversation cannot find a sincere ground to repair on.
- Contempt slowly becomes the default register of the relationship.

WHEN THE RULE IS HONOURED

- Both people can speak without armouring against ridicule.
- Earnest moments stay earnest, which is where repair happens.
- The relationship retains its capacity for sincerity under pressure.
- Difficult truths can be said without being undercut.

HEALTHY VS UNHEALTHY

AVOID

"Oh, fantastic, that is just great."

USE INSTEAD

"I am frustrated and I do not know how to say this well yet."

REPAIR OPPORTUNITY

Sincerity is the most disarming thing you can offer in a tense conversation. Almost nobody is prepared for it.

REFLECTION

- What am I trying to avoid feeling when I reach for sarcasm?
- What would it cost me to say what I actually mean?
- Who first taught me that sarcasm was safer than sincerity?

FURTHER UNDERSTANDING

The four horsemen — contempt · Gottman. Defensive humour and repair.



SECTION

Rule 07. The most expensive single move in any close relationship.

FOCUS

The line between knowing someone and using what you know.

“Vulnerability shared with you is a deposit. Treat it like one.”

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RULE 07

NO WEAPONISING VULNERABILITY · WHAT WAS SHARED IN TRUST IS NOT AMMUNITION

WHY THIS RULE EXISTS

When someone has shared what hurts them, that information is a deposit in the relationship's account. Using it as a weapon teaches them that openness with you is unsafe. Openness, once retracted, is rarely fully restored. A single instance of weaponised vulnerability can end years of accumulated trust.

WHEN THE RULE IS BROKEN

- The other person closes off access to the parts of themselves they once shared.
- Future intimacy is carried out from behind a partial wall.
- Every previously-shared vulnerability becomes a potential threat.
- The relationship loses its access to depth, even if the surface continues.

WHEN THE RULE IS HONOURED

- Vulnerability becomes safer over time, not riskier.
- The relationship deepens into territory that distance cannot reach.
- Trust accumulates as a structural asset rather than a daily question.
- Both people experience being known and not punished for it.

HEALTHY VS UNHEALTHY

AVOID

"Of course you would react that way — your father did the same thing."

USE INSTEAD

"I know this is a sensitive area for you. I want to be careful."

COMMON MISTAKE

Believing that information shared in love is fair game in conflict. It is the opposite.

REFLECTION

- What did I just do with information they trusted me with?
- What part of me felt I needed to win badly enough to use that?
- How would I want my own vulnerable share to be held?

FURTHER UNDERSTANDING

Trust as an account · Brené Brown.
Repair after relational injury · Sue Johnson, EFT.



SECTION

Rule 08. Scorekeeping as the symptom of unaddressed history.

FOCUS

One issue at a time. The case for a single front.

“Stacking grievances does not strengthen your case. It collapses your conversation.”

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RULE 08

NO HISTORICAL SCOREKEEPING · TODAY'S ARGUMENT IS ABOUT TODAY

WHY THIS RULE EXISTS

Pulling unrelated past wounds into the current conversation tells the other person nothing has ever been resolved. It also makes the current issue unresolvable, because each grievance stacks on the previous and overwhelms the conversation's capacity. Scorekeeping is the body's protest at not being heard the first time.

WHEN THE RULE IS BROKEN

- The current issue is buried under an avalanche of historical complaints.
- Both people lose hope that any resolution actually closes the loop.
- The relationship becomes a courtroom rather than a partnership.
- Previously-resolved issues are re-injured by being re-raised.

WHEN THE RULE IS HONoured

- Today's argument is about today, which makes today's argument resolvable.
- Each repair builds confidence that issues can actually be put down.
- Both people feel safer raising small things, knowing they will not become weapons.
- The relationship retains its capacity to start fresh.

HEALTHY VS UNHEALTHY

AVOID

"And remember last September when you also —"

USE INSTEAD

"I want to stay with this one thing today."

REPAIR OPPORTUNITY

If an old wound keeps surfacing, it is asking to be addressed in its own conversation. Schedule it. Do not bury it inside another.

REFLECTION

- What has not actually been resolved that I am still carrying?
- Is there an old issue I need to raise as its own conversation?
- What does the present issue actually need from me right now?

FURTHER UNDERSTANDING

Bids and turning toward · Gottman. Unresolved grievances and complex repair.



SECTION

Rule 09. The threat that lingers long after the words.

FOCUS

The bond as the unchanging floor of the relationship.

“What you say in anger is what their body remembers in calm.”

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RULE 09

**NO THREATS OF LEAVING OR ABANDONING ·
EVEN UNMEANT, THE BODY STORES THE
THREAT**

WHY THIS RULE EXISTS

Threats to walk out, end the relationship, or cut off contact during conflict register in the body of the receiver as actual abandonment, even if the speaker does not mean it. The nervous system stores the threat. The damage is cumulative — by the tenth time, even unspoken, the doubt has taken root.

WHEN THE RULE IS BROKEN

- The other person's body becomes vigilant for the next threat, never fully resting.
- Conflict becomes unsafe, not because of the topic but because of the stakes.
- The threatened-with abandonment slowly becomes anticipated abandonment.
- Even after reconciliation, the doubt remains in the body.

WHEN THE RULE IS HONOURED

- Both people can have hard conversations without questioning the bond itself.
- The relationship is the floor, not the variable.
- Difficult truth can be spoken without putting the foundation at risk.
- Conflict becomes a feature of intimacy, not a threat to it.

HEALTHY VS UNHEALTHY

AVOID

"Maybe we should not even be doing this."

USE INSTEAD

"I am angry and I am still in this with you."

COMMON MISTAKE

Confusing the threat to leave with the request to be heard. The first damages the bond. The second strengthens it.

REFLECTION

- What am I trying to communicate when I threaten to leave?
- What would it cost me to ask for what I actually need instead?
- What does the other person's body already know about my pattern here?

FURTHER UNDERSTANDING

Attachment security · Bowlby, Ainsworth. The bond as floor · Sue Johnson.



SECTION

Rule 10. The cheapest repair work available.

FOCUS

Naming the story instead of acting on it.

“You are arguing with the story you built. Check whether they wrote it.”

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RULE 10

CLARIFY BEFORE YOU ASSUME · MOST ARGUMENTS ARE ABOUT A STORY, NOT AN EVENT

WHY THIS RULE EXISTS

Most arguments are about a story one person built, not the actual event. The brain fills in gaps with worst-case interpretations, especially under emotional load. Asking what the other person actually meant collapses many of those stories instantly. It is the cheapest, fastest piece of repair work available.

WHEN THE RULE IS BROKEN

- Both people argue with imagined versions of each other.
- The actual misunderstanding goes unaddressed because no one names it.
- Resentment builds around things the other person never did or said.
- The relationship slowly fills with unverified grievances.

WHEN THE RULE IS HONOURED

- The story collapses, often within one sentence.
- The conversation can address what is actually true, not what was assumed.
- Both people experience being met, not interpreted.
- Misreadings stop becoming long-running narratives.

HEALTHY VS UNHEALTHY

AVOID

"I know exactly what you meant."

USE INSTEAD

"Can you help me understand what you meant by that?"

REPAIR OPPORTUNITY

Naming the story out loud — "the story I'm telling myself is..." — is among the most powerful repair phrases in any close relationship.

REFLECTION

- What is the story I am running about what just happened?
- Have I actually checked it, or have I been building on it?
- What is the kindest possible interpretation, and is it possible?

FURTHER UNDERSTANDING

The story I'm telling myself · Brené Brown. Confirmation bias in close relationships.



SECTION

Rule 11. Discipline in scope as a tool of repair.

FOCUS

Choosing one front. Trusting there will be more conversations.

“Five issues raised at once is a list. It is not a conversation.”

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RULE 11

HOLD ONE ISSUE AT A TIME · ONE ISSUE FULLY ADDRESSED OUTPERFORMS FIVE RAISED

WHY THIS RULE EXISTS

Stacked grievances overwhelm the conversation and guarantee that none will be resolved. The receiving body can metabolise one piece of feedback at a time. Three or four turns the experience into ambush, regardless of whether each item is fair on its own. One issue, fully addressed, builds more trust than five raised and dropped.

WHEN THE RULE IS BROKEN

- The receiver collapses into defence and cannot meet any of the items.
- The original issue gets lost beneath the additions.
- Both people end the conversation feeling that nothing is solvable.
- The relationship loses confidence in its own ability to repair.

WHEN THE RULE IS HONOURED

- Issues actually get addressed and put down.
- Both people stay in the conversation rather than shutting down.
- Trust grows that raising something will not become an avalanche.
- The relationship learns it can handle hard topics one at a time.

HEALTHY VS UNHEALTHY

AVOID

"And another thing, and another, and another."

USE INSTEAD

"There is more, and it can wait. Let us stay with this one."

COMMON MISTAKE

Treating one difficult conversation as the only chance to raise everything. There are more conversations available than your fear suggests.

REFLECTION

- What is the one issue I most need addressed right now?
- What can wait for a separate, calmer conversation?
- What am I trying to win by stacking instead of choosing?

FURTHER UNDERSTANDING

Single-topic conflict structure · Gottman. Cognitive load in difficult conversations.



SECTION

Rule 12. The orientation that determines whether all the others hold.

FOCUS

Choosing the bond over the point. Long-game thinking under pressure.

“The person who needs to win is the person who has stopped trying to repair.”

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RULE 12

REPAIR IS THE GOAL — NOT WINNING ·
EVERY MOVE IS REPAIR-ORIENTATED OR
VICTORY-ORIENTATED

WHY THIS RULE EXISTS

Every move in a difficult conversation is either repair-orientated or victory-orientated. They cannot both be served at once. Winning costs trust. A relationship in which one person regularly wins is one in which both people slowly lose. Repair is the only orientation that scales over years.

WHEN THE RULE IS BROKEN

- The relationship becomes a recurring competition with no end state.
- The winner experiences temporary satisfaction and long-term distance.
- The loser stockpiles resentment that surfaces in unrelated places.
- Both people lose access to the version of the relationship they actually wanted.

WHEN THE RULE IS HONOURED

- Conflict becomes a tool for understanding rather than a threat to safety.
- Both people stay on the same team across decades.
- The relationship retains its capacity to repair faster over time.
- Disagreements become evidence of intimacy, not erosion of it.

HEALTHY VS UNHEALTHY

AVOID

"I am right about this and you know it."

USE INSTEAD

"I do not want to win this. I want us to figure it out."

REPAIR OPPORTUNITY

Saying "I do not want to win this" out loud is a structural change in the conversation. It almost always shifts the room.

REFLECTION

- What am I actually trying to get by needing to be right?
- If we both win, what does that look like?
- What is the cost of this victory to the relationship?

FURTHER UNDERSTANDING

Repair attempts as predictor of marital success · Gottman. Win-win negotiation · Fisher & Ury.



REFERENCES

The psychology, attachment, communication, and nervous-system sources used throughout this document.

NOTE

Citations are intentionally light. Each source is named where it informs a specific rule, with optional further reading here.

“Nothing in this manual is original psychology. The structure is. The sequencing is.”

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REFERENCES & FURTHER
READING

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APPENDIX

References & Further Reading

The sources below informed the psychology, behavioural framing, and language used throughout this document. They are organised by domain. None are required reading. All are worth it.

NERVOUS SYSTEM & REGULATION

- **Stephen Porges** — Polyvagal Theory; emotional safety and co-regulation.
polyvagalinstitute.org
- **John Gottman** — Emotional flooding; the 100 BPM threshold for productive conversation.
gottman.com
- **Bessel van der Kolk** — The Body Keeps the Score; trauma and the nervous system.
besselvanderkolk.com

COMMUNICATION & REPAIR

- **John & Julie Gottman** — The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work; the four horsemen and antidotes; repair attempts as predictor of success.
gottman.com
- **Carl Rogers** — Person-centred therapy; the foundations of active listening.
- **Markman, Stanley & Blumberg** — Speaker-listener technique (PREP).
prepinc.com
- **Brené Brown** — Daring Greatly; Rising Strong; "the story I'm telling myself."
brenebrown.com

CONFLICT & REPAIR PRACTICE

- **The Gottman Institute** — Repair attempts research; bids and turning toward; gridlock vs solvable problems.
gottman.com/blog
- **Esther Perel** — Mating in Captivity; the State of Affairs; relational dynamics under stress.
estherperel.com
- **Terrence Real** — The New Rules of Marriage; relational accountability work.
terryreal.com

ATTACHMENT & BONDING

- **John Bowlby** — Foundational attachment theory.
- **Mary Ainsworth** — Strange Situation studies; secure / anxious / avoidant patterns.
- **Sue Johnson** — Hold Me Tight; Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT).
drsuejohnson.com · iceeft.com

BEHAVIOUR & COGNITION

- **Viktor Frankl** — Man's Search for Meaning; the space between stimulus and response.
- **Marsha Linehan** — Dialectical Behavior Therapy; cognitive distancing.
linehaninstitute.org
- **Carol Dweck** — Mindset; behaviour vs identity.
mindsetworks.com
- **Fisher & Ury** — Getting to Yes; principled negotiation, win-win framing.

PRACTICAL READING

- **Stone, Patton & Heen** — Difficult Conversations (Harvard Negotiation Project).
- **Marshall Rosenberg** — Nonviolent Communication.
cnvc.org
- **Susan Johnson** — Created for Connection; love and attachment in adult relationships.

The work in this document does not replace therapy, mediation, or medical support. It draws on established psychology to make repair practical. For relationships involving abuse, coercive control, or threats to physical safety, please contact a qualified professional or local support service.



CLOSING · VOLUME 01

A Note On Volume 01

CLOSING

A short note on Volume 01 and what is in build for Volume 02.

VOLUME 01

Communication Systems. The first of the IWH operating manual line.

“Volume 01. The next volume is already in build.”

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A LETTER FROM IWH

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This is Volume 01 of the IWH Communication Systems line. The next volumes apply the same protocol to parenting, workplace, and family dynamics.

Nothing in this manual is original psychology. The underlying work belongs to Porges, Gottman, Johnson, and others. What we have added is structure: a sequence small enough to follow when the body is loud and the mind is narrow.

Use it. Print the pages you keep returning to. Email what does not work to iwhltd.com — we revise these manuals as we learn more from how people actually use them.

— INTELLIGENCE WEALTH & HEALTH

VOLUME 01 · COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS · IWH

RULES OF RE-ENGAGEMENT

CLOSING NOTE