

“Warm, engaging, and infinitely valuable, Dr. Harris has written the ideal book for couples who are seeking to strengthen their relationships and grow intimacy. Harris’s *ACT with Love* takes acceptance and commitment therapy into the realm of couplehood in a kind, thoughtful, and realistic way. Share it with couples everywhere and use it in your own relationship. I plan to!”

—Robyn D. Walser, Ph.D., author of *The Mindful Couple*

“Not since *Masters and Johnson on Sex and Human Loving* has there been such a powerful, practical, and inspiring book written about love and relationships. Russ Harris really is a genius with words as well as an expert ACT clinician. With these qualities he succeeds in weaving together a path to successful relationships. Don't miss this book!”

—JoAnne Dahl, Ph.D., associate psychology professor at the University of Uppsala in Sweden

“Reading and following this book may well be the most precious gift you ever give not only to your partner, but also to yourself. I highly recommended it to those who wish to revitalize a floundering relationship as well as those who want to make a good relationship even better.”

—Robert D. Zettle, Ph.D., associate psychology professor at Wichita State University and author of *ACT for Depression*

“If you want to be the best mate you can be in your relationship, this book will help. If both you and your mate want to have the best relationship you can have, this book will help that, too!”

—Hank Robb, Ph.D., ABPP

ACT *with love*

stop struggling, reconcile differences,
and strengthen your relationship with
acceptance and commitment therapy

RUSS HARRIS, MD

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introduction: it's a messy business

Relationships are both wonderful and terrible. They can give us the highest of highs and the lowest of lows, send us soaring into the stratosphere on wings of love, or drop us from on high to splat in the mud. In those early days of your relationship, when you're holding your partner tenderly in your arms, and your heart's pounding against your rib cage like a professional boxer, it's hard to believe that one day, in the not-too-distant future, all those blissful feelings will be gone. That's right—gone. Disappeared. Vanished without a trace. And in their place might be anger, fear, sorrow, frustration, loneliness, regret, or despair, or perhaps even bitterness, contempt, disgust, or hatred.

Why should this be so? Well, the simple fact is this: feelings change. They are like the weather. Even during the hottest summer or the coldest winter, the weather continually changes—and our emotions are no different. So no matter how wonderful your partner, no matter how great your relationship, those initial feelings of love will not last. But don't be alarmed. Although they will inevitably disappear, they will also come back again. And then they will go again. And then they'll come back again. And so on, and so on, and so on, until the day you die. And it's

the same deal with every human emotion—from fear and anger to joy and bliss. Feelings come and they go, surely as spring follows winter.

Most of us know this at some level, but we easily forget it. We get hooked on those loving feelings and expect them to last. We expect our partners to meet our needs, behave the way we want them to, fulfill our wishes, and generally make our lives better, easier, and happier—and then we get upset when reality clashes with our fantasy. The great joke about being human is that the people we spend the most time with and know most intimately are the very same people who “push our buttons” the most. And while a snide remark, cold rejection, harsh criticism, or angry outburst may be unpleasant coming from our boss, a neighbor, or a coworker, it hurts far more when it comes from the person we love. There is no getting away from this: love makes us vulnerable. If we allow ourselves to be intimate and open with another—to let that person past our defenses and into our heart—then we allow ourselves to get hurt. Love and pain are like intimate dance partners—they go hand in hand. Don’t take my word for this—check out your own experience: have you ever had a close relationship with anybody and spent significant amounts of time in his or her company without experiencing some sort of painful feelings as a result of your interaction?

So basically it’s like this: if you own a house, you’re guaranteed to have maintenance costs and fuel bills; if you have a baby, you’re guaranteed to have dirty diapers and sleepless nights; and if you build an intimate relationship, you’re guaranteed to have a certain amount of pain and stress. This is one of the inconvenient truths of being human. Sharing your life with another human being can be an amazing, uplifting, awe-inspiring experience—and at other times, it can be absolutely dreadful. Pop stars, poets, romance novelists, and greeting-card companies have a vested interest in ignoring this inconvenient truth. They want you to believe all those ancient myths: that there really is a perfect partner out there just waiting for you; that without this person, you are incomplete, unfulfilled, and doomed to a life half-lived; that when you do eventually find this perfect partner, you will fall in love and remain in that blissful state effortlessly and forever.

Of course, I’m being flippant here. But the fact is, almost all of us walk around with a lot of unrealistic expectations about love, relationships, and intimacy—beliefs continually reinforced throughout our lives by movies, novels, plays, songs, TV, poetry, magazines, newspapers, office

gossip, well-meaning friends, and even self-help books. Unfortunately if we let these misleading ideas guide our lives and try to base our relationships on them, then we will find ourselves in a vicious cycle whereby our very attempts to create lasting love will ultimately destroy it.

Our misguided attempts to find love are wreaking havoc in modern society. In most Western countries, the divorce rate is now close to 50 percent—and of those marriages that last, many are full of emptiness, loneliness, and misery. Increasingly people are afraid to commit to a long-term relationship (married or not), terrified that it will all end in tears, bitterness, or lawsuits. No wonder there are now more single adults living alone than ever before in history.

Does this all sound a bit grim, gloomy, and depressing? Fear not. The good news is, there is a way to bring some order to this messy business—and this book will show you exactly how to do it. Within these pages, you'll discover how to let go of unhelpful beliefs and attitudes about love; how to realistically create an authentic, intimate, loving long-term relationship; and how to deal with the painful thoughts and feelings that all such relationships inevitably cause. You'll learn how to handle sadness, rejection, and fear; how to deal effectively with anger, frustration, and resentment; how to forgive both yourself and your partner; and how to rebuild trust if it has been shattered. You'll learn how to reduce the amount of tension and stress associated with negotiating your needs and reconciling your differences—and how to turn the pain and hurt of conflict into caring and compassion.

acceptance and commitment therapy for relationships

This book is based on a revolutionary new development in human psychology: an approach known as acceptance and commitment therapy, or ACT. ACT (which should be pronounced as the word “act,” not as the letters A-C-T) was created in the United States by psychologist Steven Hayes and further developed by a number of his colleagues, including Kirk Strosahl and Kelly Wilson (Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson 1999). ACT is a scientifically based therapy that has proven effective with a vast range of painful human conditions—from depression and

drug addiction to work stress and schizophrenia. Intriguingly, although ACT is based on cutting-edge research in behavioral psychology, it has striking parallels with many ancient Eastern traditions.

ACT is based on a set of powerful principles that together enable you to develop “psychological flexibility.” Scientific research is increasingly revealing that the higher our level of psychological flexibility, the greater our quality of life. So what does the term actually mean? Well, *psychological flexibility* is the ability to adapt to a situation with openness, awareness, and focus, and to take effective action guided by your values (your heart’s deepest desires for who you want to be and what you want to stand for in life). Sound confusing? Let me break it down.

There are two key components to psychological flexibility:

1. The ability to be psychologically present: a mental state commonly known as “mindfulness.” Mindfulness enables you
 - to be fully aware of your here-and-now experience, with an attitude of openness and curiosity;
 - to be engaged and absorbed in what you are doing;
 - to reduce the influence and impact of painful thoughts and feelings.

2. The ability to take effective action. In other words, to take action that is
 - conscious and deliberate, rather than impulsive or mindless;
 - motivated, guided, and inspired by your core values;
 - flexible and adaptable to the demands of the situation.

Put more simply, psychological flexibility is the ability to be present, open up, and do what matters. As you increase your psychological flexibility, you will be more able to effectively handle difficult feelings, disrupt unhelpful thought processes, rise above self-limiting beliefs, focus on and engage in what you are doing, and change ineffective or self-defeating behaviors so you can build better relationships.

Although ACT was originally developed for problems such as depression and anxiety, its core principles can readily be applied to rela-

tionship issues with great effect. As you progress through this book, one major emphasis will be on the development of mindfulness—your ability to be fully aware, with an attitude of openness and curiosity. Another major emphasis will be on clarifying your values—your heart's deepest desires for who you want to be and what you want to stand for in life—and using them to guide your actions. And although we'll be focusing on intimate relationships, such as with your spouse or partner, you can apply these principles to enhance and enrich any relationship that matters to you, whether it's with your children, parents, friends, neighbors, or fellow workers.

who is this book for?

This book is aimed at common relationship issues, the type that almost all couples will experience; it does not cover more extreme relationship issues such as domestic violence or severe addictions. I've written it for four different categories of reader:

- Your relationship is in reasonable shape, but you want to enrich it.
- Your relationship is in bad shape, but you want to repair it.
- You're not currently in a relationship, but you want to learn what went wrong in the last one so you're better prepared for the next one.
- You're a therapist, counselor, or coach looking for ideas on how to work with relationship issues.

If you're in either of the first two categories, then your partner may be willing to work through this book with you. However, one of the strengths of this book is that it allows you to unilaterally improve your relationship, even if your partner isn't interested.

how to use this book

ACT with Love is divided into three parts. In part 1, *Making a Mess*, we look at what goes wrong in relationships. In part 2, *Making a Commitment*, we look at whether you should stay or leave your relationship, and consider what is required if you truly want to stay and make it work. In part 3, *Making It Work*, we look at what sort of partner you want to be, what thoughts and feelings are getting in the way, and how mindfulness can help you to handle them much better. We also cover the inevitability of conflict and pain, and how you can reconcile your differences more effectively. And finally we look at ways to actively strengthen and deepen your relationship forevermore!

As you read, you will meet couples who have various relationship issues, some of which may be similar to yours. While I have worked with many people with relationship issues over the years, the stories of the people you will meet in this book are composites. I have changed their names and the details of their stories to thoroughly protect their confidentiality. Although these stories do not precisely match any real person's life, they certainly represent the struggles and successes of couples experiencing relationship issues.

Throughout the book, we will return again and again to a few basic principles of ACT, and you will learn how to apply them to make both yourself and your relationship thrive. Of course simply reading this book won't change anything. If you read a book on tennis, that alone won't make you a tennis player; you actually have to get out and hit some balls. Same deal with your relationship. If you want it to improve, you'll need to practice and apply what you read within these pages. And doing so can be hard work at times. There's no two ways about it: building a loving relationship—or repairing one that's in ruins—takes time, effort, and commitment. But of this I am very confident: if you consistently apply the approaches within this book, you will bring far more richness and love into your life. So if you think that's something worth investing in, then keep reading.

PART 1

Making a Mess

CHAPTER 1

mission impossible?

Falling in love is easy. Anyone can do it. It's like eating your favorite food or watching a great movie—lots of pleasure, no effort involved. But staying in love—now that's a real challenge, a challenge that's all the greater because of all the stuff and nonsense that's been pumped into our heads over the years. From our very first fairy tales, in which the prince and princess lived happily ever after, to the Hollywood endings of most popular movies, books, and TV shows, we hear and see the same old myths again and again. Here are the big four:

myth 1: the perfect partner

Did you know that somewhere out there, in the big wide world, there is a perfect match for you? Yes, it's true. The man or woman of your dreams is out there, hopelessly lost, just killing time, waiting for you to find him or her. Seek, and ye shall find a partner who will fulfill all your fantasies, meet all your needs, and live with you in everlasting bliss.

Yeah, right. And Santa Claus is real too.

Truth is, there's no such thing as the perfect partner, just as there's no such thing as the perfect couple. (As the old joke goes, there are only two types of couples: those who have a wonderful relationship, and

those whom you know really well.) But how hard is it to truly let go of this idea? How hard is it to stop comparing your partner to others? To stop fantasizing about the partner you could have had, or would have had, or should have had? Or about the partner you really did have, but for one reason or another it didn't last? How hard is it to stop dwelling on your partner's faults and flaws and shortcomings, and thinking about how life would be so much better if only your partner would change?

Answer: very hard indeed, for most normal human beings. But it doesn't have to remain that way. Change is possible, if you want it. Let's just take a moment to look at what it is costing you to get all caught up in these patterns of thinking. How much frustration, anger, and disappointment does it create for you? Of course, I'm not advocating that you let your partner do as she pleases, whenever she wants, without any consideration for you; that would not give rise to a healthy, vital relationship. What I am advocating is that you take an honest look at your own internalized beliefs about how your partner *should* behave and what your relationship *should* be like; notice all the negative judgments you make about your partner and your relationship; and notice how these thoughts affect you when you get caught up in them. Are they helping your relationship or harming it?

myth 2: you complete me

When it comes to movies, I'm a big sucker for romantic comedies: *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *When Harry Met Sally*. I just love them. One of my favorites was *Jerry Maguire*, which gave us the great phrase, "You complete me." This is the phrase that Jerry Maguire says to his girlfriend at the very end of the movie, to prove how much he loves her—at which point, I suddenly choked on my popcorn!

This is such an unhelpful idea to buy into. If you go along with this myth and act as if you are incomplete without your partner, then you set yourself up for all sorts of problems. You will be needy, dependent, and fearful of being alone, which is not conducive to a healthy, vital relationship. Fortunately what you'll discover as you keep reading is that you are already complete—regardless of whether you have a partner or not. Of course your mind will not readily agree to this—at least not if it's like the minds of most other people on this planet. Our

minds are naturally self-critical, and they seem to revel in telling us how incomplete we all are. But despite what your mind may protest, as you work through this book, you will experience a sense of wholeness and completeness within yourself that is independent of anyone else. This will allow you to be more true to yourself in your relationship: to express yourself honestly, ask for what you need, and stand up for yourself without holding back for fear of rejection or abandonment.

myth 3: love should be easy

Love should be easy. Hmmmmm. Let's look at this proposition more closely.

When you live intimately for a long period of time with another human being who has (a) different thoughts and feelings, (b) different interests, (c) different expectations about housework, sex, money, religion, parenting, holidays, work-life balance, and quality time, (d) different styles for communicating, negotiating, and expressing himself, (e) different reactions to the things that you enjoy or fear or detest, (f) different drives for food, sex, sport, play, and work, (g) different standards of cleanliness and tidiness, (h) friends and relatives that you don't get on with too well, (i) lifelong, deeply entrenched habits and quirks that annoy you ... it should be easy?

Does that sound convincing to you?

Of course, our minds are quick to point out that if our partners were more compatible, if they didn't have so many differences from us, then our relationships would be much easier. Good point, but now we're right back to myth 1: the perfect partner. The fact is there will always be significant differences between you and your partner in some or all the areas mentioned here and also in many others. That's why relationships *aren't* easy. They require communication, negotiation, compromise, and a lot of acceptance of differences; they also require you to stand up for yourself, to be honest about your desires and your feelings, and—in some situations, where something vitally important to your health and well-being is at stake—to absolutely refuse to compromise. This is quite a challenge. But as long as you expect your partner to think and feel and act like you, you're setting yourself up for disappointment and frustration.

Now there's no denying, some couples have more in common than others. Some couples are naturally optimistic, calm, and easygoing. Some couples have excellent communication skills. Some couples have very similar interests. And let's face it, if you're both passionately mad about rock climbing, it's a lot easier to agree on your vacation plans than if one of you loves sunbathing on the beach and the other absolutely hates it. But no matter how much you have in common, there will always be differences that challenge you. Fortunately acceptance and commitment therapy, as its name suggests, focuses a lot on acceptance. And as you learn to truly accept your partner's differences, you'll find your frustration, resentment, or anger starts to dissolve so you can enjoy the many pleasures that a healthy relationship can give you. (At this point, a little reminder: "acceptance" is not the only important word in acceptance and commitment therapy; there's also the word "commitment." This book is not just about acceptance—it's also about taking committed action to improve your relationship.)

myth 4: everlasting love

Does everlasting love really exist? This is a tricky question. Usually when people talk about love, they are talking about an emotional state: a wonderful mix of thoughts, feelings, and sensations. The problem with defining love this way is that feelings don't last very long. Just as the clouds above continually change—shrinking, growing, dispersing, and reappearing—so do our emotions. Thus as long as we define love as a feeling, it can never be everlasting.

Of course in the early days of a relationship, those feelings of love are more intense, last longer, and come back more quickly than they do later on. This is what we commonly call "the honeymoon phase" of a relationship, when we are totally intoxicated by those Romeo-and-Juliet, head-over-heels-in-love feelings. It doesn't last long—an average of six to eighteen months for most relationships, and rarely if ever more than three years. And when it is over, we generally experience a sense of loss. After all, it *does* feel good! So good, in fact, that when the honeymoon phase ends, many people break up with their partners, reasoning, "That's it. I don't feel in love anymore, so clearly this is not the right partner for me. I'm out of here."

This is a great pity. What few people realize is that an authentic, loving, meaningful relationship typically only develops once the honeymoon phase is over (another fact the songwriters, poets, and pop stars seem oblivious to). In the honeymoon phase, it's as if you're on a drug that intoxicates you and plays with your senses. When you're high on it, your partner seems wonderful. But you're not seeing reality; you're merely seeing a drug-induced fantasy. And only when the drug wears off do you see your partner as he really is. And you suddenly realize that the knight's shining armor is covered in rust spots, and his white horse is really a gray donkey. Or the maiden's pure silk dress is only cheap nylon, and her long golden locks are really a wig. Naturally this comes as a bit of a shock. But herein lies the opportunity to build an authentic intimate relationship between two people who see each other as they really are. And as this relationship develops, there will be new feelings of love—perhaps not as intense or intoxicating, but infinitely richer and more fulfilling.

So in view of all this, I'd like to suggest a more helpful way to think about love. Instead of a feeling, think of love as an action. The *feeling* of love comes and goes on a whim; you can't control it. But the *action* of love is something you can do, regardless of how you are feeling. For example, sometimes when my wife and I have an argument, we snap and yell at each other, get louder and louder, and eventually end the quarrel by storming off to different rooms of the house. This is not helpful or useful. It does not bring us closer together, and it does not resolve the issue; it just wastes time and drains the life from our relationship. We have learned the hard way that the sooner we can repair the damage, the better for both of us. Sometimes my wife is the first to reach out and try to resolve things—and at other times, I am. But one or the other of us will do it before long.

This is not easy. To do this, you need to open up and make room for your anger without letting yourself get consumed by it. You need to let go of all your thoughts about how you are in the right and your partner is in the wrong. You need to reconnect with your values: remember the sort of partner you want to be and the sort of relationship you want to build. And then you need to take action.

A few weeks ago my wife, Carmel, and I had a huge row, and on that occasion I was the first to reach out and attempt to make up. I was still very angry and I still believed that I was right and she was wrong,

but revitalizing our relationship was more important to me than “being right.” So I went into the bedroom where Carmel was reading and I apologized for yelling, and asked if she would like a cuddle. She said, “No, but if you want one we can have one.” So we lay on the bed and we cuddled. But I was not feeling love for Carmel as I cuddled her. Instead I was feeling tension, frustration, anger, righteousness—and a strong urge to continue the argument and try to win it. (And Carmel was feeling pretty much the same). However, despite those strong feelings, we continued to hug each other, and eventually we both calmed down. So clearly we were both doing the *actions* of love, even though *feelings* of love were absent.

The fact that you can act with love even when you don’t feel love is very empowering. Why? Because whereas the feelings of love are fleeting and largely out of your control, you can take the actions of love anytime and anywhere for the whole rest of your life. Indeed, this truth applies to all human feelings. For example, you can feel angry but act calmly. You can feel anxious but act confidently. And this ability leads us to one of the key themes in ACT: stop trying to control how you feel, and instead take control of what you do. (This emphasis on action is why ACT is pronounced as the word “act” rather than as the initials A-C-T.)

moving beyond the myths

There are plenty more love myths floating around, but these are the “big four,” and you can lump them together into one massive whopper: Find the right partner, then you’ll be whole and complete, and remain deeply in love for the rest of your life without any effort. For short, I refer to this story as Mission Impossible. If you believe this stuff, you are setting yourself up for a struggle with reality.

So what’s the alternative? A miserable relationship where you go around acting lovingly even though you never feel it? Well, that is one alternative, but it’s not one I’d recommend. My aim in this book is to help you create the best relationship you possibly can, given the limitations of reality—that is to say, a relationship in which you can act with love, appreciate what your partner has to offer, learn to accept your differences, handle your own emotions more effectively, and continue

to thrive and grow until the day you die. Does that sound unbelievable? If so, good! Throughout this book, I encourage you not to believe anything just because I say so. Instead, test these ideas out and see what happens.

What I'd like you to do over the next few days is to take note of all the thoughts you have about what is wrong with your relationship or your partner. See if they are in any way connected to the "big four." Each day take a few minutes to jot some of these thoughts down in a journal, and at the end of a few days, write answers to the following questions:

- What happens to your mood when you get all caught up in thoughts of what is wrong with your relationship or your partner?
- When you buy into or dwell on these thoughts, what effect does it have on your relationship?

Note: Throughout this book, I'll be asking you to write in your journal. However, to make life easier, you might like to visit the free resources section on www.act-with-love.com. There you'll find free downloadable forms, all ready to go, for every written exercise in this book.

In the next chapter, we're going to look at what drains the love out of relationships. But before you read on, please make sure to do this exercise. Or at least think about it. That way, you'll be prepared when I ask ...