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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ix

PART 1: How We Lose Ourselves

CHAPTER 1

The Role of Relationships 3

CHAPTER 2

The Secret Language of the Little Me Pact 31

CHAPTER 3

The Anxious-Avoidant Dance and More 59

PART 2: Becoming Self-Full

CHAPTER 4

Listen to Your Heart 89

CHAPTER 5

Healing Little Me from the Inside Out 115

CHAPTER 6

From Selfless to Self-Full 147

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Contents

PART 3: Loving with Our Whole Self

CHAPTER 7	
The Beauty of Boundaries	185
CHAPTER 8	
A New Way to Love and Be Loved	217
CHAPTER 9	
The Mysterious Transformational Power of Love	251
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	273
NOTES	275

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INTRODUCTION

In my young adult years, I was a train wreck when it came to dating. I'd stay in relationships to avoid being alone, and the men I dated were emotionally unavailable and unattuned to my needs. I was miserable. I felt rejected by their apparent lack of interest and angry that they didn't seem to care enough to ask me what I needed.

I want to share two experiences that shook me to my core and activated my deep-rooted attachment patterns. They touched the same wounds, but they look very different on the outside. At nineteen, I had a boyfriend who was very wrapped up in work because he had his own company. After the first rush, when the relationship became less exciting, he turned his attention back to work, which I now know is just what he needed to do. He was not a bad guy. He was just someone starting his own company and under a lot of stress. But his slow withdrawal touched a place of abandonment inside me and I

began to feel anxious. I lost weight, and life began to feel meaningless. It scared me, and over time the turmoil inside of me built up to be so intense that I had to be hospitalized for severe anxiety. When the doctor asked me why I was there, I simply said, “Because my boyfriend doesn’t love me.” My fear of being alone had been just below the surface and the shift from intense togetherness to more disconnection awakened a profound internal unease. I didn’t understand what was happening; I felt like I was going insane. I read every book on codependency, and while they helped, it still didn’t explain what was happening inside my body.

Years later, I married a man who was unable to stay in connection at all. When we first started dating, I didn’t think much of it when he didn’t text me back. But over time, I became hypersensitive to even micro-disengagements. A pattern of him pulling away and me reaching out for contact happened every six to eight weeks. I felt trapped inside the never-ending cycle but believed that the commitment of marriage would somehow change the dynamic and bring me a sense of security. Now it makes sense to me that as soon as we got closer to intimacy (and I started to feel safe), he would pull away because of his own terror of closeness. He would stop texting, and communication became flat and vague. As he grew more distant, I felt as if no one was on the other side when I looked at him. My whole body would respond to seeing him disconnect. Within a microsecond, my heart would race and my gut would fall through the floor, as if something was being ripped out of me. My vision blurred and I felt panic swirling up inside me. When I was unable to get back into connection, I would curl up in a fetal position, feeling just as lost and abandoned as I had when I was very small. He was unable to connect, particularly his

blank stare, had taken me to a primal experience of abandonment. It was as if my lifeline or oxygen had been cut off.

My early adult years were dark and confusing. I couldn't understand what was happening in my body and emotions, so I felt unhinged. What changed that was learning about my attachment patterns, nervous system responses, and core wounds. I could look back and recognize that the constant feeling of separation anxiety had been with me my whole life. This allowed me to make sense of my physical experience, and created a foundation for compassion and healing. I actually wrote this book to provide you with just that—a deep understanding of what's *really* going on in your body and why you developed in a way that often leads to self-abandonment. With that support, we will take a healing journey together that will provide you with the inner security to make fulfilling relationships possible.

Let's begin with some questions. If you are wondering whether you are anxiously attached, going slowly through this list will provide some insight. These are the feelings and behaviors we experience when our childhood has left us with a lot of legitimate anxiety about whether someone will stay with us or not. Some of them are about the anxiety itself and some are about the ways we try to protect ourselves from that anxiety. Please be gentle with yourself as you go slowly through them.

Do you find yourself continuously thinking about your current partner at the expense of other interests?

Do you constantly talk with your friends about your partner and your relationship?

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Introduction

Do you give up what you want to do in order to do what you believe your partner wants?

Do you initially see your partner through rose-colored glasses and then become disappointed when they don't perfectly meet your needs?

If your partner doesn't answer a text quickly, do you become more anxious?

Do you find yourself making up stories about what it means if your partner doesn't respond quickly?

Do you make repeated attempts to contact your partner when you don't initially get a response?

Do you get attached very quickly and then become anxious about whether the relationship will last?

Do you sometimes threaten to leave when your partner doesn't give you as much attention as you want?

Do you withdraw from your partner when this person doesn't meet your needs for contact?

Do you rush to reestablish connection after a conflict, insisting on continuing the conversation until you feel connected again?

Do you lecture and blame your partner for not staying in contact as much as you need?

Do you keep score of your partner's failures?

Do you get angry easily—either at yourself or at your partner—if that person isn't available as much as you need?

Do you think about or actually have an affair to make your partner jealous?

Do you stalk your partner online to know about their every move?

Do you hack into your partner's phone to see who they are in contact with and be sure they aren't lying to you?

First of all, know that it is absolutely okay if you identify with all or some of these behaviors—you will soon start to understand why you have these tendencies and feel more compassion toward yourself. It can be painful or feel shaming to look at these emotions and behaviors head-on. However, the work we will do together will also open the door to recognizing that you are in pain and fearful, and deserve support in healing the wounds that drive these ways of reacting in a relationship.

Let's begin in a place that might sound strange. What if I were to tell you that to improve the quality of your relationships you need to focus on yourself more often? It probably goes against everything you've learned about what it means to be a loving, caring partner. Maybe you even believe that in order to receive love you must keep giving, as if love is something that must be earned. But it's the one piece of guidance I find myself sharing time and again: to cultivate healthy relationships we need to learn to deeply understand ourselves and heal the wounds that keep us in this miserable cycle, so

we can enter our next partnership feeling stronger and more secure within ourselves. I refer to this transformational process as becoming *self-full*.

When you show up in your relationships from this empowered place, game-playing and attention-seeking tactics have no appeal for you. You will also attract people who are more compatible with you. You will have the skills and balance to work with whatever difficulties come up, and the wisdom to know if or when it's time to leave.

As a practicing couples counselor for more than ten years, I have helped thousands of women and men become more self-full and attract and establish supportive intimate relationships. I do this work because my own healing journey has taught me it is possible to change the way we respond in relationships. The key to this for me was understanding that I was *anxiously attached*, and the patterns were playing out in all my romantic relationships. This relationship style is rooted in deep insecurity and often manifests in a kind of addiction to love. A good indication that we're stuck in this type of relationship is when we know it's hurting us, but we stay trapped in it anyway or keep attracting the same type of relationship, leaving us confused and drained.

It helped so much to learn that early interactions I had as a baby and young child established these energetic patterns in my nervous system that were showing up in my love life. Confronting this meant getting real about the fact that trying to use romantic relationships to "fix" what I felt was broken in me, or to complete me, had only led me deeper into disappointment and misery. I needed to slow down, gather trustworthy support around me, and spend time healing the anxiety that my parents, with all good intentions, had hardwired inside me.

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This isn't about blaming our parents for anything. They did the best they could with what they received. And they most likely loved us the way they knew how, but love isn't all that is needed to build a rock-solid foundation for a secure sense of self. It requires parents who can see and be fully present for us as we are, even when we are messy, angry, or sad. They also need to be loving and curious about who we are becoming by supporting all aspects of our selves. Because they are really seeing us, they are good at reflecting our inner state to us and are equipped to repair the mistakes they might have made. All of this creates safety for us to grow into our authentic self with confidence. These experiences with our parents are literally building our brains in ways that will support us being able to have relationships that feel just this fulfilling when we're ready for friendship and then romance. Perhaps most important is that we are also internalizing them as ongoing companions who form the core of an inner community that will nurture us throughout our lives. We'll be exploring more about the brain and about internalization later in this book.

Many parents simply didn't get what they needed to be able to provide this kind of safety for us. When we internalize them, we also take in their anxiety or anger or absence. Then it's up to us to get serious about the repair work. I have to say this process of healing was the most difficult thing I have ever done. It meant revisiting past wounds, which bit by bit allowed my deep-rooted expectations about how relationships feel to change. The biggest catalyst for doing this work was the end of my first marriage. I faced a lot of loneliness, confusion, and fear as I challenged myself to be okay with being single. When I did reevaluate the relationship was

uncovering my deep subconscious wounds so I could heal them. During this time, I started to seek emotionally present friendships, leaning on the friends who were warm and consistent. This helped me feel supported while I worked on repairing my inner world. Their care gave me the safety I needed to do the work and also helped to calm my nervous system. I know that I internalized them because I can feel their kindhearted support like a community as I write this. And slowly, as I healed, I didn't lose myself in romantic love the way I had. This process has led to a sense of inner calm, stability, awareness of my needs, and trust in myself that I never imagined was possible. Eventually, it led me to a loving partner with whom I have formed a more secure attachment. In the container of this new relationship, I began to integrate all my growth and newfound awareness, allowing us to reach deeper layers of truly fulfilling intimacy. As a result, I feel supported by him in a way I never knew existed—and I'm able to show him the same level of steady support and acceptance in return. Regardless of where you are on your journey, the transformation process we will explore together in this book will allow you, too, to understand what you need to heal old wounds so that you can cultivate healthy, loving, and sustainable relationships. I wrote this book because this is my wish for you.

In the first three chapters, we will focus on deepening our understanding of our selves and our behaviors in relationships. This will allow us to develop wisdom and compassion for the parts of our selves that we may have wanted to disown. This awareness and acceptance becomes the foundation for change.

We'll begin by looking at two attachment styles, each developed

in childhood, that leave people with different patterns of relating as adults, especially in their closest relationships. Some people have developed an anxious attachment style like the one I described in myself. This is different than the feelings we all have at the beginning of a new relationship. Because everything is new and unknown, the dynamics don't always surface in the beginning. Each person is going through a lot of different feelings, and it makes sense that at times we are *all* left questioning if it's really safe to let go and be vulnerable. It can be confusing because the relationship can start out feeling blissful and exciting until intimacy fears surface and our core wounds are activated, leaving us feeling lost and bewildered.

Anxious attachment stems from a deep sense of *inner instability* where old wounds make people anticipate that they will be abandoned again and again. These feelings can result in behavior that—ironically—only pushes a partner further away: texting dozens of times in a row, hacking his or her phone, obsessing over social media posts, or becoming clingy and jealous. Underneath all those behaviors are feelings of terror and a desperate need to keep this person close and attentive. The result? Turbulent, painful, and ultimately unsustainable relationships.

This book is written for those with anxious attachment, but it will also be helpful to understand the style at the other end of the spectrum. Avoidant attachment is also rooted in early childhood experiences with parents who weren't present for us or able to offer enough emotional support, but avoidants developed a different coping mechanism. Seeing that it was dangerous to depend on others in a relationship, avoidant types learned to protect themselves by staying distant from **Copyrighted Material** company. They are often dedicated to their

careers and tend to back away when closeness threatens. Criticism of their partners can give them reasons for ending the relationship. While this is not my style of attaching, I have had lots of experience being on the receiving end. We focus on these two because they are often attracted to each other like a moth to a flame.

In the next chapter, we'll explore the world of the youngest parts of our selves, referring to this part of us as *Little Me*, who learned what they had to do to keep parents in connection with us. Compassion tends to blossom when we get a real taste of how the behaviors we may dislike the most in ourselves were absolutely essential for staying attached to those who were most central in our lives. These early losses lead to core wounds that we may not be consciously aware of, but drive us to continue the patterns as we grow into adulthood.

With this understanding, in the last chapter in part one, we can explore how the anxious-avoidant dance of adult relationships emerges from these childhood experiences. Two people seeking a loving relationship get drawn into familiar patterns of protection because of the core wounds of childhood. This leads to what Melody Beattie calls a codependent relationship. A very short definition of codependency is trying to control another person's emotions and behaviors so we don't have to experience our own painful feelings. *If I can get you to stay close to me, I won't have to feel the frightening abandonment that is lurking inside me* (anxious person). *If I can stay far enough away from you, I won't have to experience the vulnerability that threatens to make me feel the black hole of emptiness inside me* (avoidant person). Each person is actually depending on the other to provide protection but in ways that guarantee more misery for

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both people. Avoidant people become even more convinced that relationships are to be avoided, and anxious people, who are more in touch with their emotions, suffer agonizing abandonment as they become selfless in the attempt to keep the other person. This is a dynamic we'll be exploring in depth.

In the last part of this chapter, we will touch on the kind of wounds that lead to the even more destructive behaviors of love addiction for the anxious person and narcissistic self-focus for the avoidant person. Having experienced this kind of relationship myself, I know the pain of it and the necessity of healing the wounds that make those of us who are anxiously attached vulnerable.

Then we will move into the heart of the book, the work of healing the core wounds and becoming self-full. We'll walk through all of it together. Perhaps the most important lesson I learned in addressing my own anxious attachment style is that facing my deepest fears of abandonment, loneliness, and not being worthy of love is the key to becoming healthily self-full and ready for a balanced relationship. The longer we ignore these vulnerable, wounded parts of our selves, the longer we'll have the heartbreaking experience of being in relationships that feel just like the abandonment and fear that was a familiar feeling from childhood.

As human beings, we have a hard time with pain, often doing everything we can to avoid the discomfort of facing the ache inside us. The inner work of becoming self-full, which includes locating exactly where it hurts and attending with kindness to these hurting parts, is no exception, to the extent that many of us will go our whole lives without addressing our pain. Even when we instinctively sense that this is how we free ourselves of unhealthy attachments,

we often shy away because we don't have the necessary support to get in touch with this deeper pain and fear. Our society often encourages us to go through this alone, but it's important to find the right people, in the form of a therapist or one or two friends who can listen with warmth and without judgment. I will also have the privilege of holding your hand throughout this book. I will be working with you to help you develop your new internal support system. Allowing yourself to feel cared for and listened to by others will also create a sense of safety, which is the vital and often missing ingredient to becoming self-full. This external safety net will soothe your nervous system, build an inner community of care, and allow you to be fully embodied and gain the awareness to respond differently to your attachment needs when they arise. Over time, you will find yourself feeling so much more secure.

We'll begin with a reflective practice that will help us build what is called *interoception*. This means listening to our body's sensations to bring us into contact with our inner world. This is the place where our core wounds have been protectively stored until someone comes to support us in healing. We can be with our younger self, our Little Me, hold their experiences, and meet our Inner Protectors and Inner Nurturers. Because you and I are holding this space together, and you will also be seeking other companions—a therapist or trustworthy friends—you will have what you need for this part of the journey.

Having started to develop the capacity to listen inside, in the next chapter, your Little Me will begin their healing journey. You can return here again and again for the guided practices that will give them the support they need for the rest of your life. To accom-

pany you, I am recording these meditations so we can do them together. This part of the journey will be painful at times as we touch the fear and anguish that has been hurting inside since you were small. What makes it possible is the care and warmth we bring with our listening presence while building internal resources that will last a lifetime. This movement toward becoming self-full becomes possible because you are brave enough to do this work.

In the last chapter in part two, we will explore the movement from selfless to self-full. What you can expect when you emerge from this journey. We will spend a little time reviewing where we've been and then celebrate the new fullness that is emerging as we continue to support Little Me's recovery and build a strong Inner Nurturer community. There is a guided practice for strengthening self-fullness along with a growing sense of gratitude for this new solid ground.

Now we're ready for part three. What will it be like to move toward interdependence with a partner? In this kind of relationship, both partners have enough inner security to not depend on only each other for connection and also to be at ease with growing intimacy. At the same time, they can lean into each other to provide support. We could say that they neither abandon nor invade each other. Weaving this new way of being into a partnership is challenging and rewarding. It means developing new kinds of internal and external boundaries (chapter 7), gaining skill in working through the hard parts so that the repair work between two people strengthens rather than disrupts the relationship (chapter 8), and drawing on the universe's resources to sustain a life that is ever-renewing its capacity to manifest love (chapter 9).

I believe that people come into our lives for a reason, and that

each person we cross paths with has a valuable lesson to share with us. We just need to be open to receive it. Seen this way, we might say that the underlying nature of all relationships is spiritual. This is why the path to becoming self-full is also a spiritual journey toward wholeness, one in which we seek to establish a connection, not only to our inner selves, but to a source of unconditional love and support that's greater than anything we can put into words.

There is a profound mystery in this journey inward. We may begin to feel that we are divinely supported, never alone, and that the universe really does have our backs. Relational neuroscience also tells us that we are built for these kinds of safe and nurturing connections that fill our bodies with the neurochemicals of warm, secure bonds. Trusting in this spiritual connection and the right human support, we begin to act more spontaneously and creatively, increasing our chances of fulfilling love to make its way in. As you begin to heal, you will feel more secure in the world, within your relationships, and within yourself.

I share this as motivation for the journey we are about to begin, a journey to better understand and heal your hurts, so you no longer need to seek outside for *all* your comfort and nurturing. The work in these pages—which includes guided meditations and practices to help you navigate through your deepest emotional wounds and needs—is designed to illuminate parts of your inner world that require TLC, while encouraging you to explore how the dynamics of past relationships were actually shining a light on these sore, vulnerable parts all along. As you move through this book, please go at your own pace and honor the time it takes to move deeply into your inner world. We can do this together.

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How We Lose Ourselves

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CHAPTER 1

The Role of Relationships

The first and most important thing I want you to know is that your desire to be in a relationship is the most natural thing in the world. We are all hardwired to connect with others on an intimate level. We are born physically connected to our mother by the umbilical cord that has literally been our only source of sustenance, the magical thread of life itself. As babies and young children, we continue to rely on our parents and wider family group to survive, while part of growing up means learning to become more self-sufficient, until eventually, we are capable of meeting our own survival needs. As we grow into adulthood, our society tells us it is important to be self-reliant and independent, but if we are anxiously attached, our inner world tells us that we must cling close in relationships or we will be abandoned. In truth, the blueprint for the middle way, for interdependence, is in place before we even take our

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first breath. We are social creatures from birth until our last moment, always reaching for safe people we can lean into who can also lean into us. Nothing says “I am safe” like truly connecting with another person.

Once we find ourselves out in the world, seeking connection outside of our immediate family, how do we know the person we are trusting with our feelings is up to the job and isn't going to take our tender, open heart and trample on it? Faced with this uncertainty, as adults we tend to stifle our desire to connect by becoming hyper-independent, or else we burn through one relationship after another, as a quick fix for the ache of loneliness inside. While it's true that we no longer need the kinds of connections that ensure we will be fed, clothed, and sheltered, our adult relationships fulfill two different—but equally important—roles: the need to see and know ourselves through the eyes of another in a way that allows us to feel supported and safe, and the satisfaction of long-term intimacy with another.

In our most intimate relationships, the ones where we feel truly safe and relaxed enough to be our “real” selves, we are able to access even deeper states of being and discover the joy of being accepted for who we truly are. In this way, our close relationships become a mirror in which to meet our *whole* selves. Secure in this whole self, we can understand our deepest needs and seek to have them met as we confidently stake out our place in the world. Nothing is more validating and freeing than the permission to simply be *us*—and in a healthy relationship, this permission is granted on both sides in an ongoing, unconditional mutual exchange of acceptance and appreciation. When this is the case, conflict is seen as a way to build

the empathy and understanding that can bring us even closer together. This all helps us to feel comfortable with intimacy, allowing us to give and receive love more easily.

Depending on the influences of our parental and cultural upbringing, we can struggle to form these secure and healthy attachments. Perhaps as children we experienced a sense of disinterest in us, so we learned how to cope on our own. Or maybe we were only intermittently attended to, so we anxiously cling to any scraps of attention and affection that come our way, not trusting that there will always be enough. When the foundation for our connections has been built on shaky ground, we must heal these core wounds so we can create the secure relationships we desire.



WHAT IS ATTACHMENT THEORY?

Attachment theory, also known as the science of how we connect in early childhood, was pioneered by the psychologist John Bowlby in the 1950s. Bowlby explained that, as babies, we are dependent on caregivers for our basic needs, and the way those caregivers (our parents, grandparents, and siblings) tend to our needs creates an *attachment style*. This can affect the way we relate with others throughout childhood and into adulthood. Bowlby, along with his colleague Mary Ainsworth, also identified three different attachment styles: anxious, avoidant, and secure. An understanding of these relational patterns forms the basis of my work as a couples therapist—and also helped me understand my own relationship

tendencies after my first marriage ended in a devastating divorce. At an emotional rock bottom, I knew the time had come for me to make a change. I realized I needed to forge an inner sense of security that had been lacking all my life as I discovered that my own anxious attachment style was at the heart of my unhappiness.

As I described in the introduction, those who experienced being anxiously attached are frightened of being abandoned because their parents were so inconsistent in providing connection. To protect themselves from this happening again, they tend to focus all their energy on finding a relationship. Their need to maintain the connection often emotionally suffocates their partners because they can't stop themselves from obsessing over their partners' level of commitment. When this new person begins to pull back, feelings of not deserving love often come to the surface. Their lives can become an endless search for a relationship that will prove they are lovable, but the need to cling for reassurance out of fear and insecurity creates demands that often lead to the very abandonment they fear.

Meanwhile, people with avoidant attachment have a strong need to hit the eject button at the first sign of intimacy. In this case, the core belief is the same—*I will not receive the love I need*, but it was delivered differently by parents who were consistently unable to provide for the emotional needs of their children. Their natural conclusion is that they have to go it alone, so they learn to prize their independence and self-sufficiency above all else because they don't believe anyone will provide for their emotional needs.

Those who are securely attached are more comfortable with intimacy and trust that their emotional needs will be met. As children, their parents consistently offered warm and caring, communicating

how lovable they were. This primes them to expect and want interdependency in their adult relationships. They are able to offer their love and support to a partner without losing their sense of self, so they can easily transition from a feeling of being closely connected to more on their own without becoming afraid that the relationship is ending.

Many of us have experienced more than one attachment style as children. Maybe our mother was anxious and inconsistent and our father was often silent behind his newspaper. Since we have both those patterns inside us, either of them can come up depending on who we're in a relationship with now. If we're feeling a friend or partner is clinging to us, the avoidance we experienced with our father may activate us to pull away. If we're with someone who has a tendency to pull away, we may find the anxiety we experienced with our mother rushing to the surface. As we move through this work together, you will get greater clarity about your own tendencies, patterns, and needs in different situations. This will gradually help you have a better understanding of what you need in a romantic partner.

People who have had a secure upbringing often wonder why they still have insecure feelings at times. It is important to realize that all of us can still have anxiety when our partners have a strong tendency to pull away from intimacy. Those feelings are an adaptive early warning system telling you to be more aware of what is happening between the two of you. Having this knowledge in your emotional tool kit will remind you that attachment is always a two-person experience.

Neither of these attachment styles is "better" than the other. The