

*With gratitude...*

**To my clients**

Thank you for trusting me with your stories.  
You've taught me more about love, pain, and resilience  
than any textbook ever could.

**To my husband**

You've shown me what real partnership looks like -  
thank you for being my mirror, my calm, and occasionally,  
the very test case that inspired a few pages of this book.

**To my best friend, Carla M**

My chosen sister, my anchor. Your presence has carried me  
through every chapter of this journey - with honesty,  
laughter, and unwavering love.

**To my team at Psychotherapy In The City**

My business partner and friend, Maria, and all those who've  
stood beside me. Thank you for the shared vision, the heart-  
led work, and the courage to build something meaningful  
together.

**To my family**

For your patience, your grounding love, and your belief in  
me as I poured days, late nights, and pieces of myself into  
these pages.

*With love,  
Clarinda*



# **Fight Smarter, Love Stronger**

For those who walk the winding road of love with open hearts, brave enough to face the hard conversations and soft enough to let connection in, may this book be your companion in turning conflict into clarity and rupture into repair.

To the incredible clients who've entrusted me with your stories - your courage, honesty, and resilience have been my greatest teachers. You've shown me what real love looks like in all its messy, beautiful complexity.

And to the team of therapists, mentors, and colleagues I've had the honour of learning and growing alongside - thank you for shaping the therapist I am today. Your presence has been part of every page of this work.

This is for all of you.

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*The stories and examples shared throughout this book are inspired by real relationships and therapeutic experiences. To honour privacy and protect identities, names and identifying details have been changed.*



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# Introduction

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Nobody likes it, but we all deal with it...

## **Conflict.**

Here's the twist: conflict doesn't have to be a bad thing. In fact, it can be a pathway to a stronger, healthier relationship - *if* you know how to navigate it.

Welcome to *Fight Smarter, Love Stronger*, a book about transforming conflict into connection. Yes, we're going to talk about fighting, but not in the way you might think.

We're not entering a war zone. We're heading into deeper understanding, stronger communication, and, surprisingly, a little humour along the way.

In today's world, relationships look very different from the traditional model. Gone are the days when one partner worked while the other waited at home with dinner and a smile. Today's relationships are about shared responsibility - both of you juggling careers, parenting, personal growth, and intimacy, all while trying not to drop the ball. And let's be real: balls get dropped.

The trash doesn't get taken out. A spontaneous purchase pushes the budget. Someone forgets to reply to a message or book an appointment. And suddenly, a small spark becomes a full-blown argument.

But here's the thing: fights aren't always about what's happening in the moment. They're often about something deeper - an unmet need, a long-standing pattern, a longing to feel understood.

Most of us aren't just fighting about chores or spending. We're fighting because we want to feel seen, heard, and valued. When that's missing, even the smallest issue can ignite something much bigger.

What I see most often in couples I work with isn't that they argue - it's *how* they argue.

*I remember one couple who sat on my couch in silence for nearly ten minutes. The tension was thick. When I gently asked what was happening, one partner finally whispered, "I don't know how to say what I feel without it turning into a fight." The other replied, "And I don't know how to hear it without feeling like I've failed." Neither of them wanted to hurt the other. But both felt stuck, wanting connection, fearing disconnection.*

Communication during conflict is either the glue that holds people together or the wedge that drives them apart. It all comes down to how you express your needs and emotions, especially when the stakes are high.

And let's clear something up: arguments aren't meant to be scary or bad. In fact, they're a natural - and necessary - part of connection. They give us a chance to express ourselves, assert our boundaries, and move closer through understanding. But often, conflict taps into our own emotional histories. Instead of staying grounded in the present, we're reacting from past pain. And that's when ruptures happen.

The way you express yourself during conflict - your tone, posture, and facial expressions - often matters more than the words you use. That's because our nervous systems are wired for survival. When things get heated, we shift into defence mode: fight, flight, or freeze. Our brains scan for danger, usually based on past experiences. And

the people we love most are often the ones who can unintentionally trigger those defences.

If you grew up watching parents scream or give each other the silent treatment, chances are you've internalized some of those habits. And if you're a parent now? You're passing along that blueprint - *unless* you intentionally change it.

One piece of advice I give every couple: Argue well in front of your kids. Let them see emotional regulation, repair, and respect. That's the legacy you want to leave.

If you picked up this book, it means you're ready to try something different. You're not here to eliminate all conflict (that's impossible). You're here to **fight well**. To argue in a way that builds clarity, not confusion.

So, how do you develop a healthier fighting style?

First, let's bust a myth: *a good relationship isn't one that's easy - it's one that's intentional*. Anyone who says relationships shouldn't require work is either delusional or avoiding reality. Healthy love takes effort. So if your relationship feels like work, that's not failure - that's normal.

In these pages, you'll learn how to:

- Set healthy boundaries
- Understand your triggers and defence patterns
- Communicate your needs in ways that can be heard
- Recognize when to soften, when to stand firm, and how to return to connection

Disagreements are inevitable. What matters is what you do *next* - how you repair, how you speak, and how you

take care of yourself and your partner when things go sideways.

Is This Just for Couples? Not at all. Whether you're in a relationship or reflecting on past ones, this book is as much about personal growth as it is about partnership. Conflict always invites us to understand ourselves better. You'll gain tools that apply across relationships like romantic, familial, and professional, because the common thread is *you*.

## **From The Therapist's Chair**

As a psychotherapist and relationship expert with almost two decades of experience, I've had the privilege of guiding individuals and couples through their most vulnerable moments. Watching people grow in their love, communication, and ability to listen to one another is one of the greatest rewards of my career.

That said, I often notice something troubling: many couples spend far more time planning their weddings than investing in their relationship. Don't get me wrong - weddings matter. But a lifelong partnership doesn't happen by accident. It's a daily decision. A practice.

Too often, people wait until their relationship feels like it's falling apart before reaching out for help. That's why this book starts with *you* - your beliefs, your upbringing, your triggers - because until you understand how you show up in conflict, it's hard to create change.

Therapy is powerful, but it's not always accessible or immediate. This book isn't a replacement, but it *is* a toolkit. You'll find language, strategies, and reflections that I've used with clients for years. And you'll learn what

I've come to believe: that the way we fight tells us everything about the way we love.

You don't need to be perfect to have a great relationship.

You need to be *present*, *curious*, and *willing*. This book is your invitation to begin doing things differently - to listen more closely, speak more clearly, and love more deeply.

So, are you ready to fight smarter and love stronger?

Let's get started.



# CHAPTER 1

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## Why We Fight: The Truth About Conflict in Relationships

Fighting. That big, scary F-word no one wants to talk about - but everyone deals with.

But before you brace yourself for another lecture on how to “stay calm” or “pick your battles,” let’s get one thing clear: fighting doesn’t have to be scary. In fact, when handled mindfully, it can become one of the most powerful tools for growth and intimacy in your relationship.

Disagreements. Arguments. Squabbles. Whatever you call them, they’re not signs of failure. They’re not the beginning of the end. They’re not even always about the thing you’re arguing about.

Conflict is often a signal, not a problem. It points to something deeper - a need, a wound, a moment where one or both of you are craving to be seen, heard, or understood. In that way, conflict can be a form of connection - *if* you learn to approach it that way.

It’s tempting to believe that couples who never fight are doing something right, like they’ve reached some conflict-free version of romantic enlightenment. But here’s what I know from years of sitting with couples in my office: **every couple fights.** The couples who thrive aren’t the ones who avoid conflict. They’re the ones who learn to use it wisely.

## Why We Fight

To understand how to “fight healthy,” we first need to understand why we fight at all.

Conflict typically arises from unmet needs, differing perspectives, or emotional triggers. It can be something small, like who forgot to grab milk, or something deeper, like feeling underappreciated, lonely, or dismissed. But regardless of the surface topic, there’s often a more vulnerable message underneath:

*“I don’t feel seen.”*

*“I don’t feel safe.”*

*“I don’t know if I matter to you right now.”*

But instead of expressing that directly, we say:

*“You always do this.”*

*“You never listen.”*

*“Why can’t you just...?”*

And the fight begins.

Here’s what most people don’t realize: fighting isn’t just about the issue - it’s about the emotion beneath the issue. It’s not about the dishes. It’s about feeling like no one has your back. It’s not about the spending. It’s about feeling like your voice doesn’t matter. When you start to see conflict this way, the entire tone of your communication can shift.

This is the question I want you to hold as you read this book:

***“Am I fighting to win - or am I fighting to connect?”***

Because here's the truth: if either one of you is trying to win an argument, you've already both lost. The goal of conflict isn't victory - it's understanding. It's connection. It's saying, *"I want to stay close to you, even when this is hard."*

Unfortunately, many couples enter arguments with their guards up, ready to defend, attack, or withdraw. The moment a disagreement becomes a power struggle, the original need - the desire to be understood - is lost.

What would happen if you approached every disagreement not as a contest, but as an opportunity to connect more deeply? What if instead of, *"How can I prove I'm right?"* you asked, *"What's really going on for me and what might be going on for them?"*

When you shift from "me versus you" to "us versus the problem," everything changes.

## Reflection Prompt: Winning vs. Connecting

Take a moment to reflect on a recent argument or moment of tension in your relationship.

- What was your goal in that moment – were you trying to *win* or *connect*?
- How did your approach affect the outcome of the conversation?
- What might have changed if you had paused to ask: *“What do I need right now and how can I express it in a way that invites connection?”*
- If you could go back and reframe the argument with connection as the goal, what would you do differently?

*Journaling this out – even just a few lines – can begin to shift how you show up in conflict. Remember: connection doesn’t require agreement. It requires presence.*

## Understanding Your Triggers

Healthy conflict requires self-awareness. And that starts with knowing your **triggers**.

We all have them - those emotional landmines that, when stepped on, cause a reaction that feels bigger than the moment deserves. Maybe it’s a sarcastic tone. Maybe it’s being interrupted. Maybe it’s being told, “You’re too sensitive.”

Often, these triggers are rooted in the past, early experiences where we felt dismissed, unseen, or unsafe.

We carry these emotional echoes into our adult relationships without even realizing it.

For example, if your partner says, “Relax, it’s not a big deal,” and you suddenly feel your chest tighten, it may be because that same phrase was used to invalidate your feelings as a child.

Or if they forget something important to you, and you find yourself spiralling into anger, it may not be about the forgotten detail, but about a familiar sense of being unimportant.

When you begin to identify your own patterns, you can respond rather than react. You can pause. Reflect. Choose curiosity instead of defensiveness.

## **Redefining the Goal of an Argument**

If the goal is connection, not control, then we need to rethink how we argue.

Most people approach arguments with the subconscious aim of being right. But relationships aren’t courts of law. You don’t get a medal for proving your partner wrong. And even if you “win” the argument, what have you really won?

Healthy conflict isn’t about scoring points. It’s about staying emotionally connected even when you disagree.

When you start an argument, ask yourself:

*“Is my goal here to feel understood or to punish?”*

*“Am I creating space for both of us to feel heard?”*

*“Am I showing up as a teammate or a rival?”*

The moment you shift your goal to connection, you open the door to compassion, clarity, and real solutions.

## The Power of Listening

None of this works without one essential ingredient: **listening.**

Real listening. Not waiting for your turn to speak. Not rehearsing your rebuttal. Not interrupting because you're sure you already know what they're going to say.

Listening is one of the most intimate acts in a relationship. When you listen well, you communicate: *You matter. I want to understand you. I care how you feel.*

Active listening means tuning into the emotion underneath the words. It means asking, "Can you help me understand?" instead of saying, "That's not what happened." It means choosing presence over pride.

Even if you disagree with your partner's point of view, validating their experience builds trust. And trust is the bridge that makes future conflicts easier to cross.

So the next time a disagreement starts brewing, don't panic. Fighting isn't a sign you're broken. It's a sign you're two human beings trying to love each other with all your complexity.

Conflict is inevitable. But conflict doesn't have to mean chaos.

By recognizing your triggers, shifting your mindset from winning to connecting, and listening with intention, you can transform arguments into moments of truth, intimacy, and healing.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Conflict is inevitable in relationships, but it doesn't have to be destructive. It can be a powerful opportunity for growth and deeper connection.
- The real issue in most arguments isn't the topic at hand, but the unmet needs and emotional triggers underneath.
- Ask yourself in every conflict: *Am I fighting to win or to connect?*
- Healthy conflict begins with self-awareness: recognizing your own patterns, triggers, and emotional responses.
- The goal of any argument isn't victory - it's understanding. When the focus is on connection, not control, resolution becomes possible.
- Active, empathetic listening creates the foundation for trust and repair, even when you disagree

## **Let's Dive In: Reflecting on Your Conflict Patterns**

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*And this is where the real work begins. Throughout this book, you'll find guided reflections and exercises designed to help you move from understanding your patterns to actually changing them - one conversation, one moment, and one connection at a time.*

*Continue this journey in *Fight Smarter, Love Stronger*.*