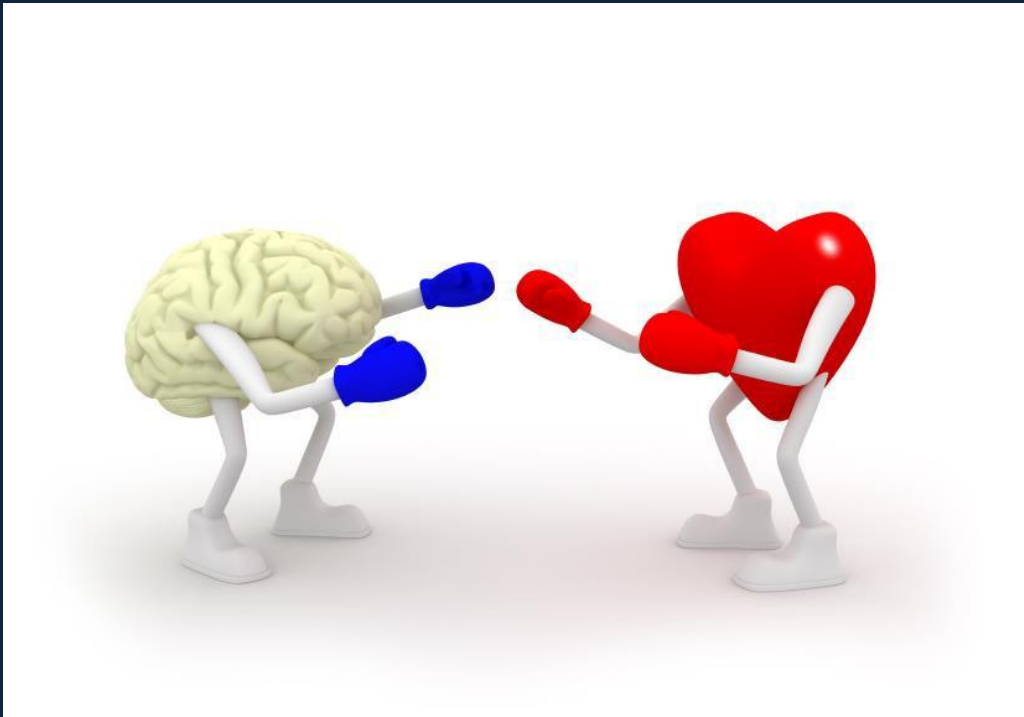


# Practical Brain-Based Tips for Relationship Success©

LEARN HOW TO REWIRE YOUR BRAIN TO FIND THE PERSON YOU HAVE BEEN  
LOOKING FOR OR IMPROVE YOUR CURRENT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP NOW

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## **Health Information Disclaimer**

The information contained in this book is general in nature and is not meant to substitute for the advice provided by your own physician or other medical professional. None of the statements in this book are a recommendation as to how to treat any particular disease or health-related condition. If you suspect you have a disease or health-related condition of any kind, you should contact your health care professional immediately. Recommendations are not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent disease.

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## Introduction

Now that you have taken the relationship quiz, you must recognize that there are some areas in which you would like your relationship to improve more than others. This book has been constructed to help give you a start to this process. In it, you will find a general idea, brain-based explanations, relationship applications and then three simple tips to execute. Throughout you will see hyperlinks that will take you to the studies or reviews that will show you the original data. I would suggest only clicking on this at the end of each chapter.

Each chapter focused on a few concepts only. Obviously, the story is more complex than this, and science, rather being the Holy Grail, is a great way to frame what you need to do and why. I call this sense-making, and whenever I present science, I am never suggesting that it is the whole story. Also, findings change from time to time, and it's important to make sure that these principles apply to you and your life, first and foremost.

I would also suggest that you start making changes to your top cause and that you examine this deeply. In relationships, things are rarely black and white, but after 25 years of working with patients on physical and emotional challenges, certain principles do seem to converge with the research out there. I have done my best to represent this to you.

Also, remember that if you have purchased this book, you will also have access to the private FB page. I also visit this often and will provide research and answer questions as you have them. So, enjoy this book and stay connected! I am excited to join your journey.

*Dr. Sini Pillay*

# CHAPTER ONE

## YOUR BRAIN'S GPS



In your RELATIONSHIP QUIZ, two questions would signal that you have GPS issues:

1. I feel hopeless that my relationship will get much better
2. Financial walls restrict my choices of and within relationships

If you got less than 5/5 for each of these, then know that both factors point to the fact that you have a restricted sense of possibility. Perhaps you are even too much of a realist. People who have GPS issues have brains that cannot generate progress because they do not have a blueprint for success. In the same way that your car's GPS needs start and end points, your brain's GPS also needs start and endpoints for the destination. If you want your relationship to get better, where are you now and where do you want to be? Similarly, if finances restrict your relationship choices, when and how can you change this? You don't have to know the answers. You just must know what you want and spell this out for your brain.

All relationships require a sense of possibility to provide relief, feel rewarding and get you started whenever you meet a wall or slow down. The most difficult challenges can be that much easier if you start by saying, "this is possible"—no matter what you want. This does not mean that you should have a cheerleading kind of optimism, but simply take time out to give your brain permission to succeed. The belief in a better future can rewire your brain to feel rewarded, and therefore be more motivated to succeed.

## **EVIDENCE FROM BRAIN SCIENCE**

We used to think that "placebo" was simply an inactive substance. It was simply a sugar pill that had no effect on the brain since it is not chemically active. We expect that even

when people expect to have some effect, placebo will cause no brain change compared to active drugs. Yet, we have been wrong all along.

The [simple expectation of reward](#) can turn on the pleasure centers in your brain. Your anxiety decreases and you feel much better even if just for a while. At first glance you may ask, then why bother if this effect does not last? But if this were true, then you probably would avoid your favorite past-times, food, sex or that occasional martini as well.

Whatever your short-term solution, it usually helps to have one. Not everyone can sail off into Nirvana at the drop of a hat. [Even physical pain is worse](#) if you expect the worse. And it gets better when you expect to get better. So why not hope for the best?

In fact, [placebo can actually release dopamine](#), one of the pleasure chemicals in your brain. And when it does, you feel better. It's not lying to yourself. It is knowing deeply that you can feel better even if you don't know how because your unconscious brain can figure this out. It's like a jumpstart, and the moment you change your brain, you jump onto that motivation to do something.

Realists refuse to do this. They think that it's not the real thing. In so doing, they rob themselves of the chance to make the changes they want. You see, placebo—the physical form of possibility—actually [helps you even learn from reward](#) rather than ignore it. It may not help you avoid losses, but why not sharpen your ability to know when good things are happening?

Placebo [affects how you see things, how you move, and how you process emotions](#).

Possibility is your brain's placebo. It is at the very least a reprieve from your everyday

burdens. Who wouldn't want that? Some people think of this as deception. I think of it as expectation—a way of setting the stage for actions rather than being paralyzed by fear and doubt.

In your brain, [there is a navigation system or GPS](#) that collects information to get you to your physical goals. The main cells of this GPS system are called grid cells. If you don't engage this system or somehow convey that there is no goal or path, your GPS will not function. Possibility thinking can turn on that GPS system and help you keep it online. It allows your brain to function [like a surveillance system](#), collecting past experience, smells and various other kinds of information to work fast and furiously to get you to your goal. Your brain makes a map when you want to get somewhere. Possibility is a way to make this map relevant.

## APPLIED TO RELATIONSHIPS

Whatever your challenge, whether it is finding that special person in your life, making more money or wanting something better for yourself and your partner, possibility thinking is the way to start.

In fact, [research shows that when couples are optimistic](#), they work out their conflicts much better and they feel more satisfied with the relationship. [Optimism or possibility thinking also helps you cope better with stresses](#) and in so doing enhances your relationship.

In large part, [optimism is a left-hemisphere](#) phenomenon. It [helps couples cooperate more when solving problems](#), and increases your chances of success. It's important to



realize that I am not prescribing being falsely optimistic when stresses are too great. Instead, work on reducing the stress first, and then see the possibility for getting what you want when you are in the right frame of mind. [Too much optimism in the face of huge stresses can lower your immunity.](#) So be real, give your brain a chance, and keep one eye on the ground even when your heart is set on flying.

## PRACTICAL TOOLS, TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

**Follow the steps below to implement possibility thinking in your relationship now.**

1. **Program your GPS:** No matter where you are or where you want to be, your brain needs to know this clearly. So, spell this out. If you want a relationship, spell this out. If you want your current relationship to be better, spell this out. Either way, you need to punch in your coordinates into your brain's GPS.
2. **Be accountable:** Discuss your plan with your partner or trusted others: There is nothing like making sure that you are accountable for your desires. So, talking about this really helps.
3. **Say “it's possible” even if just for a while and when you do, perform one simple action to get your closer:** Feel rewarded and reduce stress. Ask yourself, “if it were possible”, what would I do? Don't expect to know. Just expect that these questions will be conveyed to your brain's surveillance center to collect information to get you to your goal.

# CHAPTER TWO

## YOUR BRAIN'S UNCERTAINTY AND GUILT CIRCUITS



In your RELATIONSHIP QUIZ, two questions would signal that you have UNCERTAINTY AND GUILT issues:

3. I feel uncertain about the future of my relationship
4. I feel guilty about my past

If you got less than 5/5 for each of these, then know that both factors point to the fact that you have an overdeveloped sense of uncertainty and regret. They are both standing in your way and preventing fulfilling relationships in your future. Ideally, you should dial this down, but this is easier said than done. When you are unsure about the future of your relationship or of even having one, this consumes all your resources and robs you of the chance of keeping your attention on the here and now. You miss opportunities. You focus on the negative. This keeps your mind engaged on all the bad stuff without allowing you to harvest the present.

Imagine if you were a farmer obsessed with next season's weather or last season's failures. You wouldn't have the bandwidth to focus on the present. Similarly, it is very difficult to have the bandwidth to grow relationships if you use it all up for the future and the past. Nobody can know for sure what is to come. And there isn't a soul on earth who has not done something regrettable. Yet, you can put both things in context and move on. There is always a chance to improve in the future.

## EVIDENCE FROM BRAIN SCIENCE

Uncertainty about the future [biases your brain](#). It makes you think that bad things are going to happen even when they don't. This is because it activates the brain's disgust and

conflict centers, making them over-respond to what is happening. Nobody is saying that you must be certain. You just must stop being such an emotional spaz. Meant lovingly, what I am saying is that we all freak out about the future. But this throws your brain out of balance. The feelings seem real, but they are not. They trick you into believing that the worst is yet to come. You take your eye off the ball. And when you do, it comes right at you and knocks you out because you are too busy worrying about it.

Some of us are [wired to hate uncertainty](#). But that doesn't mean that you can't do anything about it. It does however make you anxious and there's nothing like anxiety to make relationships miserable. Part of the problem is that you often feel this at a gut level. Your [insula is responsible for this](#). But you can learn to send those feelings from your brain's gut responses to its analyzing center for reassessment.

Similarly, [this same region](#) is involved in making guilt on your brain like Velcro on Velcro. [Guilt can lead to shame](#), which then casts a shadow on the entire relationship. It lessens your self-worth, and your partner or future partner can pick this up. It's why people who feel excessive guilt often find people to make them feel even more guilty. If you don't work on the guilt and shame, it can consume you.

So, you made mistakes in the past. So, you regret them. Learn from them and move on. Life is too short to obsess about the past. It can make you punish yourself even, and when self-hatred comes in, it's very hard to find love with another.

## APPLIED TO RELATIONSHIPS

The problem with uncertainty is that [it distorts your judgment](#). Did you know that women

prefer men who like them to men who don't. But even more, they like men when they do not know how those men feel about them even more than when men like them. It's fine to keep people guessing for a while, but who wants a life of never knowing whether someone likes them or not?

Since you know that uncertainty distorts your judgment, it is important to “correct to neutral” whenever you think things are about to collapse. Recognize that your brain is playing tricks on you, and that things may collapse, but they may also not. Uncertainty really takes you out of your comfort zone, and when it does, it takes away your best and greatest power—yourself.

When you are uncertain in your relationship, [it can dampen your body's stress response](#). Cortisol does not act the way it should. And you lose your resilience. It's even worse than when you are uncertain about yourself. Instead, [focus on maintaining the relationship](#) and you are more likely to keep it going. On the other hand, if you are truly uncertain about your relationship, you may want to wait a bit. Studies show that premarital doubts do not bode well for the future—there's a [four times greater chance](#) of getting divorced even if you are happy now.

It's important to keep it real too. [Authenticity protects you](#) from depression and even suicidal ideation. Also, [feeling guilty may relax your partner](#), but it not going to advance anything for you. Instead, [if you learn self-forgiveness](#), it is likely to help you and your relationship as well. So, think of anxiety and guilt as signals. Learn from them and move on. Avoid attachment to either. They don't help you find or maintain a satisfying relationship.

## PRACTICAL TOOLS, TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

Follow the steps below to deal with your uncertain and guilty brain in your relationship now.

1. **Keep it real.** Value authenticity above all else. This does not mean that you should talk about everything, but rather, that you should correct back to yourself when uncertainty and guilt throw you off. If you are uncertain, don't ignore it. Just ask yourself why you have the doubts you have and resolve them before you get married.
2. **Correct to neutral:** You know that uncertainty messes things up in your brain. So, when you next feel like the world is going to come crashing on you, tell yourself that this is a distortion. Then, ask yourself, how might it not?
3. **Self-forgiveness:** Spend every day thinking about one thing that makes you guilty. Ask yourself what you learned from this—good and bad—and then find a way to put this behind you. Recognize that you are only human. We all mess up. But we must move on.

# CHAPTER THREE

## YOUR BRAIN'S CONFLICT CIRCUIT



In your RELATIONSHIP QUIZ, two questions would signal that you have GPS issues:

5. I hate change in relationships
6. I am conflict avoidant

If you got less than 5/5 for each of these, then know that both factors point to the fact that you have a brain whose conflict detector is a little out of whack. Have no fear. It [can be rewired](#). You can in fact [teach an old dog new tricks](#).

My pet peeve is when people say, “I am who I am.” This implies that they do not and cannot change. Also, when people are shocked that their partners have changed, this seems absurd to me. We are [wired to change](#). Often, when we change at different paces in relationships, this causes conflict. You may try to ignore this, but it eventually catches up with you. That’s why it’s important to know how to deal with change and conflict. Problem is—it’s hard to do without first understanding what is going on in your brain when you or your partner changes.

Change itself indicates that you are trying. In the best of worlds, it indicates that you are growing and not stagnant. And if you can match your growth with your goals, then your brain’s overreaction to change can be managed more effectively.

## EVIDENCE FROM BRAIN SCIENCE

Whenever there is change, your brain starts a revolution. This is known as [cognitive dissonance](#). The ACC—an abbreviation for your brain’s conflict detector—starts to



activate, and when this is excessive, [your brain may try to go back to a former state](#). This is how progress is stifled. It is how relationships become stale. And it is why you may also become bored. In fact, when you reject a choice, your brain will rally to convince you that you never wanted it in the first place. It [happens when you make the choice](#). It's why people settle so often. It is not a formula for success at all.

Uncertainty, lack of familiarity, fear and a host of other factors often make new choices undesirable. In life, you must figure out what you want to change and what not to change. Few people can tolerate changes in all aspects of their lives at once. Combine this with the unpredictability of life, and you can see why this might be really problematic.

It is important to note that we often neglect what we truly want in favor of social sanctions. This can be problematic, especially if it stops your authentic growth and development as a couple. People who have open relationships, acceptable affairs or include alternative sexual practices do so at their own peril. [If the brain had to hear even one negative social response, it might scurry back to its former life, leaving the relationship at risk](#).

The way to stop your ACC from over-signaling conflict is to [spell out why the future is better than the current situation very, very clearly](#). The difference between now and the future must be large. [This is called spread](#) and if it is not large enough, your ACC will prevent you from moving forward. You pay a price for every change and conflict that you take on. Known as [switch cost](#), it is also important to recognize that you are willing to pay this price for good reason.

## APPLIED TO RELATIONSHIPS

There are certainly upsides to not liking change or avoiding conflict in relationships. A few people manage to get through life with this attitude, but not many. Most people end up being bored, or afraid that either their feelings have changed or that their partners are unrecognizable. I can't tell you how many times I have heard "I love him, but I'm not really in love with him anymore." As soon as I hear this, I know that one person has changed differently from the other. If you want to feel the feeling you felt when you first got together, you're in trouble. Not many people can pull that off, especially if the relationship has developed. As exciting as infatuation or the first phase of a relationship can be, it's hard for any relationship to stay this way.

The initial excitement you feel is part anticipation, part "good kind of fear" that activates the anxiety center in your brain—the amygdala. However, as your relationship develops, trust starts to become a part of it. You stop being afraid of "not knowing" the person. On the one hand, this is a good thing. On the other, [trust can decrease amygdala activation](#) so you feel like you are caught between a rock and a hard place. You feel calmer, but also more bored. When this happens, you try to shake things up—date nights, kids, new friends—but these kinds of things only work for a time. You must look much deeper.

Is it not possible that you can grow from your conflicts? Can you perhaps represent yourself more in your relationship? Rather than trying to resist change, why not learn how to embrace it. [Emotional acceptance helps couples move forward](#). To do this, you may have to spell out to your brain why the new change is necessary—and to accept that it will be rough at first, but it's what you want.

Sometimes, your feelings are not even related to the person you are with. [Your early life experience may become the lens](#) through which you view relationships. In that case, you also do a spread of alternatives of what used to be and what you actually want. This will help you move toward it.

Say, for example, you had intense relationships as an adolescent but there was a quick turnover. This becomes the pattern you are used to. Staying with one person becomes more and more difficult. You may avoid conflict because you can't justify your feelings. That's because [your feelings sometimes have nothing to do with your partner](#). They are a brain habit. You must reset your brain by resetting your expectations and undoing your former habits.

## PRACTICAL TOOLS, TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

So now that you understand the brain chaos that change creates, the importance of changing all the time, and the fact that your conflicts may come from past habits what can you do to rewire your change brain?

1. **Switch cost:** Talk with someone else about the price you must pay to go from single to attached or from where you are with someone to somewhere else, whether this is engagement, having children or making your relationship more exciting. You must pay some price. Recognize and emotionally accept this.
2. **Spread:** Then make a list of why the future change is so much better than what you have now. Refine this list until you are emotionally moved and convinced. Remember that this is not just a pros and cons list. You must feel too. Without feeling, this list is just logic with the power to move you. And don't settle for the first spread either. Take your time until you are truly convinced.

3. **Habit:** See what one former habit in relationships has held you back even while it comforted you. Perhaps you gave too much or were too trusting? Whatever it is, make a conscious effort to leave this habit behind. The results will be astounding.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## YOUR BRAIN'S ANXIETY CIRCUIT



In your RELATIONSHIP QUIZ, two questions would signal that you have ANXIETY issues:

7. I feel socially anxious
8. I am afraid that my relationship will not last

If you got less than 5/5 for each of these, then know that both factors point to the fact that you have a brain whose anxiety center is not serving you. So, you feel socially anxious, or perhaps anxious that you do not have what it takes to make this work. The temptation will be to isolate or run away—this is your brain’s way of expressing fight or flight. Neither is the solution if you are looking for your relationship to thrive. You must come to grips with the fact that life is short, and if it is real romance that you want, then you are probably going to have to traverse many parts of yourself that make you anxious—your neediness, your desperation, your loneliness, your need to be comforted, your desire to be accepted. This is a lot to ask of anyone and we are sometimes ashamed about this. What if we get found out?

Well, I have news for you. People may twist themselves outside of this pretzel of human vulnerability, but they are still made of the same substance no matter what they do. It’s all about making the shape of your life work for you. It [helps to integrate your vulnerability and strengths](#) into the full human being that you are. [Learning to manage your emotions early on in life can help you in late life too.](#)

### EVIDENCE FROM BRAIN SCIENCE

The anxiety center in your brain [is a powerful influence](#) over all the ways you lead your

life. In fact, [more than a quarter of all people in the world have anxiety disorders](#). This can impact large systems and even create thought patterns that are common but not necessarily functional.

When anxiety gets in the way of your relationship, it can impact the decisions you make. This is because one powerful connection is between your [amygdala and prefrontal cortex](#)—the decision brain. Extreme anxiety makes sensible decisions very difficult. Whether you are [socially anxious](#) or just [anxious about your future](#), you can't trust that your decision brain is going to be functioning the way it should. In fact, anxiety throws off your [ability to assess risk](#) as well. With all this going on in your brain, you make impulsive decisions feel relieved, but don't realize that you will simply recreate this situation if you don't address the anxiety.

For this reason, it is very difficult to maintain a relationship if you have anxiety. Also, anxiety is not always something you actually feel. It may be amygdala activation and you [may know nothing](#) about it. Still, [it can stress you and your relationship](#) out. Even when you don't feel anxiety, it can affect the way in which you think.

So many breakups, unnecessary fights, rash decisions, and loneliness happen because your anxiety gets in the way. Either it straight-on assaults you or creeps in under the radar. That's why you need to take care of it, and luckily, we now know many brain-based ways to do this. While there are several steps, the first two that have been shown to change amygdala activation are [reframing](#) and [refocusing](#). It may be [hard at first to force yourself to see things another way](#). Yet eventually, simply taking a step back to see if there is another perspective or distracting yourself from the cause of your anxiety can help you decrease amygdala activation and send blood back to your decision-brain.

## APPLIED TO RELATIONSHIPS

Anxiety [makes you feel more insecure](#) about your relationships. Social anxiety, for example, can make you avoid expressing anger or negative emotions, and this [can lead to a deterioration of your relationships](#). Anxiety can also make you [overly sensitive](#) to other people. As a result, it can be really disruptive because there is less room for honest expression or understanding.

If you are anxious about finding a relationship you want, this may drive you to look for one. That's a good thing. But as I discussed above, if your anxiety is too great, it will disrupt your thinking brain. Your decisions about others will probably not be optimal. You will be less likely to assess risk in relationships. And you will find it harder to innovate in relationships or even make the right decisions to stay or leave. People who cannot find what they want often thwart their chances because their anxiety gets in the way. This applies whether you are looking for a relationship or trying to improve your current one.

Based on the brain science above, how can you reappraise what are you trying to solve—look at the problem an entirely different way? Let's say you ask, "Why can't I find someone?" If you do, your brain will come up with reasons why. But if you asked, "How can I find someone?" your brain will search its databases for an entirely different solution. Now it will start looking for ways. But you can't just try the first suggestion and leave either. You must be able to accept or reject solutions your brain comes up with, and then move ahead. If the anxiety of going out alone, joining a group online, meeting with people who have things in common with you is too great, then use distraction. It sounds crude, but [distraction from anxiety can reduce physical pain](#). It's been shown [over and over again](#).



## PRACTICAL TOOLS, TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

Based on what we now know then, you can start to develop more effective anxiety management techniques to help yourself with your relationship.

1. **Double-check:** Let your partner know that you are sometimes overly sensitive when you are anxious. Your first responses may not always be the ones you want to follow. This gives you a chance to make mistakes, and not go on a wild goose chase on arguments. It also allows you to change your mind mid-way in an argument without feeling like a dolt. In fact, most of us could benefit from this technique, as we rarely learn to assimilate new information once we start out on an argument.

2. **Reappraisal:** Whatever your problem, try solving it from different angles. Take 3 months per angle and try phrasing your question differently. If you ask your brain, “Will my relationship actually make it?” change this to “What makes relationships last?” Or if you ask your brain, “How do I please my partner?” change this to “How can I create situations we will both love?” You will be surprised how minor twists in framing can open a whole new world.

3. **Distraction:** If the anxiety is overwhelming, then find something that takes your mind off this completely. Great music, a kaleidoscope or even surfing the net for sport can all give your brain the rest it needs from all the beating up from anxiety. Remember too that old relationship patterns can trap you into old habits. Excessive anxiety may be familiar, but [it is not your friend](#).

# CHAPTER FIVE

## YOUR BRAIN'S MIRROR CIRCUIT



In your RELATIONSHIP QUIZ, two questions would signal that you have MIRROR issues:

9. I feel like my partner's moods affect mine a little too much
10. I wish I could win more arguments in my relationship

If you got less than 5/5 for each of these, then know that both factors point to the fact that you have a brain whose mirror neurons are working a little too hard.

Everyone knows what it feels like to feel what others are feeling. You cry when you watch someone else being tortured in a movie. Or you laugh your socks off when you watch uncontrollable laughter worthy of happy tears and rolling on the floor. Yet, at times, this ability to [mirror the emotions](#) of others can really get in the way of relationships.

You come home, happy as a lark. Your partner is sitting there scowling. In a matter of seconds, you are suddenly both at it, and your good mood seems to have flown out the window. Try as you might, you cannot set things right. You listen, feel their emotions, and try to have an empathic ear, but it all falls flat. Suddenly, you are at a loss. You become angry too. And the situation spirals out of control.

Most couples do not realize that they are often not actually angry with each other. They have just picked up the other person's emotions. When you understand this, major shifts can happen. Also, when you understand your brain more deeply, you can start to manage situations where emotions obstruct resolution of conflicts.

## EVIDENCE FROM BRAIN SCIENCE

We [may in fact understand and feel](#) more than we actually want to. We know this intuitively when we identify certain people as a “buzzkill” or wet blanket because their feeling states interfere with our enjoyment. At some level, why should they? After all, their feelings are their feelings. Yet, at the most basic biological level, we are wired to feel the feelings of others automatically. This happens because we have a system of brain circuits called mirror neurons. [These neurons](#) not only allow us to feel as though we are diving when we watch divers dive, they also allow us to understand the emotions and intentions of others too. Wired together, they form the brain’s mirror, an automatic way for us to be connected.

On the surface this sounds good, but when we would rather have only our own emotions, and not have the negativity of others impact us, this can really throw a wrench in the works. That’s when you start arguing, getting more and more angry, and things can spiral out of control.

But say you are in a real argument, one in which you want your partner to agree with you. But no matter what you do, you can’t see eye to eye. What do you do? Your brain is [wired to understand others](#) in two ways. One is called emotional empathy; much like the mirror neuron phenomenon above, you can automatically feel what someone else is feeling and mirror that back to them. The other is called cognitive empathy. This is all about walking in someone else’s shoes. Your brain becomes like a roving video camera. Rather than being focused on your partner, it gets moved and starts to see the world through their eyes by moving right next to them and looking in the same direction. Also called perspective taking, it is the [linchpin of good negotiation](#).

## APPLIED TO RELATIONSHIPS

When we think of relationships, then managing your mirrors and brain's video camera become critical parts of how you can reach success. This also applies to first dates and even conversations in general. If your brain is processing something too frightening to another person, their brain is going to know it even if they don't. They will make up a reason for why they feel the way they do and scam.

So, what do you do when someone else's emotions are infecting yours? How do you stop this contagion? First, you recognize this, then, you throw a blanket over your mirror—which effectively means that you take your brain's attentional flashlight off their emotions and deliberately place them on something that will create positive emotions in you. Anything—commenting on their shoes, thinking of your niece, fantasizing about a cupcake—whatever floats your positive emotional boat can stop your mirror neurons in their tracks. Suddenly, your brain is consciously deciding to move its attention away.

But what if you are in an argument and want to switch to cognitive empathy to win a negotiation? How do you do this? You start by saying, “So even though I am disagreeing, I am not seeing something. From your point of view...” The moment you do this, you start to help them feel understood. Rather than lauding your opinion over them, you are seeing the world through their eyes. [The more you do this](#), the more successful you are likely to be. Even if someone does not agree with you at all, [adopting their perspective](#) helps them come over to your side.

These shifts can be hard at first, but over time, as you practice them more and more, you can easily master them.

## PRACTICAL TOOLS, TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

With the science in mind, can you see how simple some of these techniques are? Start with the suggestions below, and I think you will see amazing results.

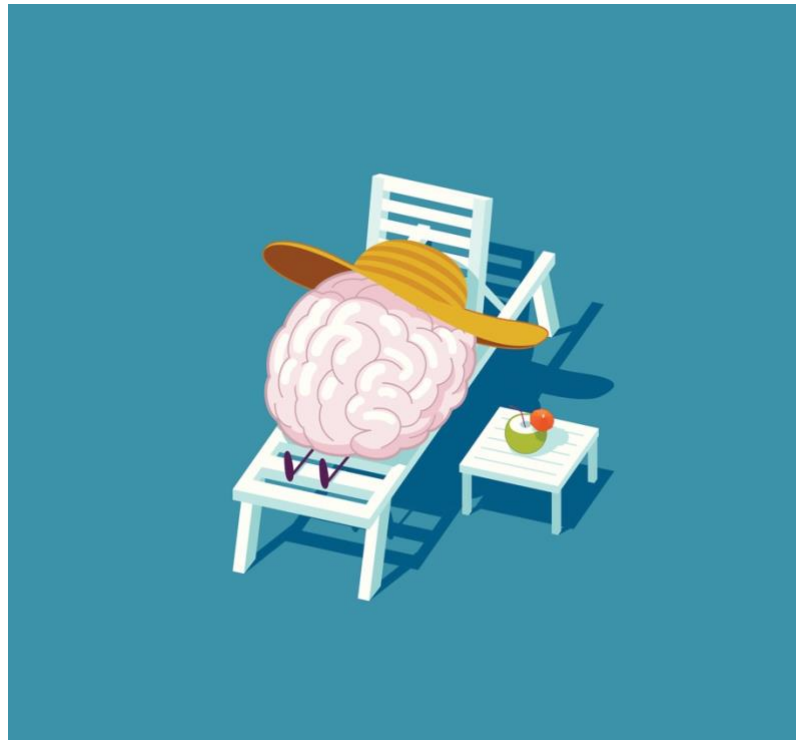
1. **Moving away from the mirror:** Let your brain's attentional flashlight become like a roving lighthouse light. When someone else's emotions are getting to you, choose other things to focus on. Simply turning on the news and ignoring someone is not likely to yield great results. But saying, "I want to talk about this, but just to say, you look really great today", although initially disarming, if well placed and real, can yield amazing results. Or you could appreciate the taste of a meal as you are talking, or even do this silently in your head. Think about what makes you tick. Have a ready-to-go-to list of things so that you can immediately think of this. Anything goes, from popcorn to a recent business win. Thinking of this while someone else is emoting can save your emotional brain.

2. **Become the roving video camera:** Instead of arguing with someone, just go stand next to them and see the world through their eyes. Everyone's world is different. If you take the time to do this, it will help you reach common ground.

3. **Decrease anxiety:** When you are anxious, [all you can actually care about is you](#). It's a survival mechanism, but it will prevent you from thriving in a relationship. Instead, try to manage your anxiety by using the techniques described in Chapter Four. This will help you assume the perspective of someone else much more easily. It's great that we are connected, but you need to manage this connection actively.

# CHAPTER SIX

## YOUR BRAIN'S RESTFUL CIRCUIT



In your RELATIONSHIP QUIZ, two questions would signal that you have RESTFUL CIRCUIT issues:

11. I don't take criticism well in my relationship
12. I feel lonely and abandoned when my partner is not there

If you got less than 5/5 for each of these, then know that both factors point to the fact that you have a brain whose restful circuits need more of a role.

Perhaps you or someone else thinks that you need to take a chill pill more often than not. People who cannot manage their restful circuits would balk at the idea of this, and perhaps even feel insulted. But if you took a step back, what's wrong with actually inserting a little more rest into your life? If intensity is what you have been thriving on, a little more rest will give you just the break you need to keep on being your intense self.

Nobody actually likes criticism. But if we see criticism more as someone else's frustration at first, we could start to see what we might care. Also, although most criticisms hurt, they also offer a chance for self-improvement if we care to change the way we are. And they offer us the chance to offer similar feedback to trusted others.

It's hard when someone you are used to having around is not there. Long trips away or even a day away when you really need someone can feel like a lifetime. But your chill circuits can help you here once you recognize what they do and how to activate them.



## EVIDENCE FROM BRAIN SCIENCE

When someone criticizes you, [your brain scrambles to make sense of this](#). Emotional processing centers come on board and start working away at making sense of the information that just came your way. If you are not anxious, you may be able to control your feelings and be flexible. But anxious people flail, because their “chill circuits”—the [default mode network \(DMN\)](#)—are cut off from playing a role. Ordinarily, your “chill circuits” come on when you are unfocused. [The moment you rest, they start working](#).

Your “chill circuits” are supposed to switch off when you need to concentrate. But [when you are anxious](#), they stay on and interfere with your concentration, because then you are chilling when you don’t need to. [Anxious people](#) cannot regulate this circuit. And [when you have had a prior trauma](#), this circuit does not work well on its own either.

Your “chill circuit” [comes on with meditation](#). When you take a step back and stop focusing for a while, this is the circuit that comes to your rescue. Everyone should have a moment in their day when they are in this state of [mind wandering](#) to help balance your brain out. When you are in this state, different parts of your brain can also feel [more connected](#). It’s like your brain has downtime so that it can process important concepts.

Your “chill circuit”, with its purring or low-level activity is [not doing nothing](#). On the contrary, it is making your life easier by decreasing anxiety, helping you feel more “together” and concentrate more effectively, and also [be more creative](#).

Knowing this then, it helps to apply it to relationships.

## APPLIED TO RELATIONSHIPS

Criticism can have a [dramatic impact](#) on relationships, both in the giver and the receiver. However, although many of us can dole out criticism, it is often very difficult to receive it. Outside of pure abuse, criticism can help both people in a relationship grow. One way to deal with this is to be mindful. This means that rather than reacting to criticism and worrying about it, you observe it, chew on it, and come back to it at a later point when you are out of reactive mode. Learning to be this way by treating your thoughts as “things to observe” rather than “who you are” can go a long way. In fact, [mindfulness meditation](#) can decrease worry and reactivity to [stress](#). To do this, you turn your brain flashlight to your breath and try to gently keep it on your breath rather than paying attention to your thoughts when you are criticized.

[Anxiety](#) can also be reduced when you are mindful. This helps you not feel abandoned or too alone when your loved one is away. The feeling is one of [level-headedness](#). It is [not that you feel more secure](#) at all. You can just deal with this anxiety of insecurity more effectively.

When you are mindful, you engage [five basic ideas and behaviors](#): you are passive rather than active, not-wanting rather than wanting, non-changing rather than changing, non-judging rather than judging and passive acceptance rather than active acceptance. You don't necessarily feel like this all the time. Just starting to choose each behavior and making small improvements can go a long way.

In theory, it would be great to learn mindfulness meditation to turn on your DMN, decrease your anxiety and find creative solutions to relationship problems. But starting small can really help you gain the confidence you need.

## PRACTICAL TOOLS, TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

So, as a start, even before you meditate, ensure that you are truly signed on to these techniques. Understand that although these techniques have some religious and spiritual underpinnings, we are really approaching this from the viewpoint of changing your brain.

1. **Embrace the paradox:** In the five questions above, start with one behavior and then increase each every week. You will likely see how effective this non-reactivity can be.

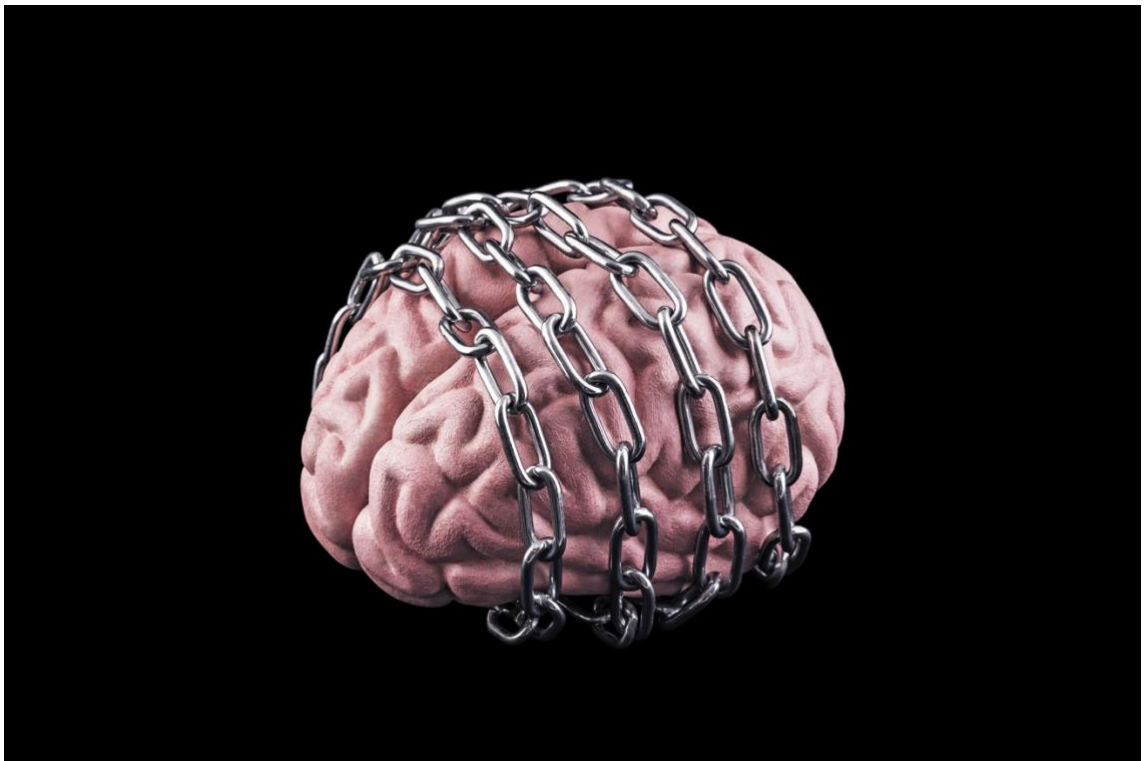
Sometimes people say this makes them feel like a robot, and that makes sense. But rather than thinking of it as a full personality change, you can think of it as a useful tool to help yourself.

2. **Mindfulness Meditation:** This type of meditation can be very helpful, even [as helpful](#) as medication for preventing depression. In fact, it can actually [increase the density](#) of your brain tissue. There is a great description of what this feel like at this [URL](#).

3. **Mind wandering:** Schedule some mind-wandering time in your day. Don't just lapse into it. When you do, you will be in control of both your focused and unfocused mind, and both must exist together for your thinking to be most effective.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## YOUR BRAIN'S HABIT CIRCUIT



In your RELATIONSHIP QUIZ, two questions would signal that you have HABIT CIRCUIT issues:

- 13. I keep in encountering the same problems in a different context in my relationship
- 14. I feel bored by my relationship

If you got less than 5/5 for each of these, then know that both factors point to the fact that you have a brain whose habit circuits need to be managed more effectively.

Habits [keep us safe](#), but [they also trap us](#). If you think of habits as your house, you will realize that you need to leave them from time to time. You can also return to your house whenever you want to, and perhaps even build new houses that serve you even better. This circuit is one of the key circuits that impacts the excitement you can have, and when you can inhabit your temporary home, you will be in a great place in a relationship. But when habits become hell, you become trapped in them. And [escaping them becomes more and more difficult](#).

Until recently, we believed that we are simply who we are. But [much recent research](#) has now proved that [we can change our brains](#). Not only that, but after the changes, we can also learn to make new habits, such as good health habits, [stick](#).

Understanding how your brain works can help you tap into those habit circuits to change them and reset your relationship life.

## EVIDENCE FROM BRAIN SCIENCE

The basis of habit in the brain is a phenomenon known as [LTP](#) (Long-Term Potentiation.) Once you learn something, it becomes automatic because neurons that fire together with each new learning start to wire together. i.e., [they become connected](#). When they do, they become the brain's default system. If, for example, you adjust at first to a relationship, and then, every time you get into an argument, you cry, this becomes a habit. This may serve you, in which case it is great. Or it may work against you, because it stops the development of the argument and growth in the relationship. Similarly, you may tell yourself to stop giving neurotically, but every time you get into a conflict, you give even more of yourself during and after. This is called [pathological giving](#), and it can become a very destructive habit.

[Learning new habits is possible](#). It [can change the brain](#). But first it will require a commitment from you for new behaviors. What habits do you want to change? What habits are keeping you stuck and alone or stuck in your relationship? [Not only new learning is conscious](#) and deliberate either. Simply through [trial and error](#), we are wired to change our brains and learn new habits. So rather than being stuck on being perfectionistic, why not start to change now, mess up, and try again. It's better than being stuck in habit hell.

It also helps to reinforce new habits through [repetition](#) or strong [emotion](#). If at first difficult, you can start to form new habits by breaking down your goals into what we call [implementation intentions](#)—things that you can start to do right away. To this effectively, it is important to choose one or two things that can help change how you can [serve your attention](#) so that you don't get bored either.

## APPLIED TO RELATIONSHIPS

Even the way you watch TV can turn into a habit that affects your relationship. [One study](#) showed that people who have pragmatic relationship love styles tend to watch the news, whereas those who are into the “loving” aspects of relationships are more likely to watch soap operas or dramas. Sometimes, you can even switch this up depending on your phase of life, right? You can also [use your loving relationship](#) to promote new healthy behaviors like drinking alcohol less or eating well.

When we think of habit in the brain, this suggests that you must decide on where you want new learning in your relationship. Every 3 months you can set a learning agenda. This can vary from an actual action (e.g., riding horses) to a concept such as learning to tolerate each other’s bad moods. You start by labeling the moment. Just doing this can help stop you in your tracks and can also [decrease your anxiety](#). Let’s say you call this a BMM— a bad mood moment. This helps you label it, recognize that it’s not really about the other person and also take it less personally. Affect labeling is a [well-recognized](#) technique to stop being reactive.

In addition, to help your boredom, you can actually do more active things and more passive things. Not all boredom is cured by date-nights or scheduled excitement. But you can carve out spontaneous time in the day when there is absolutely no pressure to do anything. Setting aside one-half day a month when you will absolutely do what your partner is suggesting (within reason) can be a great way to revitalize your relationship. They set everything up. You just go. This can be anything from a movie to hiking, and you can have criteria as well. The one spontaneous day must change every week. It can’t be dangerous etc. [Spontaneity leads to improvisation](#) and this crate much happiness.

## PRACTICAL TOOLS, TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

With that said, there are several things that you can commit to today to get started.

1. **Monitor your habits:** To break a habit, you [have to first identify](#) those that are hurting your chance of a relationship or the relationship itself. It's not always that simple. You may actually like begging out on the couch, but this may not be serving you. Or you may like drinking a lot, but this may also not serve you or your brain. Find that one habit that you want to work on and commit to it.

2. **New learning and repetition:** What new habit might you want to replace couch “vegging out” with? Perhaps once a week, you will go for a walk in the neighborhood instead? Starting to do this and then repeating it can help you develop a new habit. Alternatively, you can also have a three-hour fantasy time where you tell your partner what your greatest fantasies are. They don't have to be sexual—they can relate to where you want to live or how you want your life to be. Living outside the “we” can be a relief to couples tired within the habit of their togetherness.

3. **Scheduling spontaneity:** The paradox about spontaneity is that we have no time for it. Why not schedule it at a different time at the beginning of each week? This can help you prevent making excuses for not being able to escape your boredom.

Habit can be reversed. So, start now and remember that trying is better than being paralyzed.



## Conclusion

There is of course no conclusion to how we can become better at managing our relationships. Every day offers a new opportunity. Good thing that our brains are wired to learn from trial and error, and that we can help ourselves by changing our brains. It's always important to remember that science gives us hope in all these ways—that it informs that no matter what the obstacles, and no matter how old we are, we are wired to connect with each other. And we can do this with targeted ease to start. At the very least, it helps to frame our interventions.

If this interests you, follow me on Instagram (@drsrinipillay), twitter (Twitter) and LinkedIn. I look forward to staying in touch.

*Dr. Srinipillay*