

# **Loving Bravely**

# **What's in it for me? A practical guide to making love last.**

From steamy romance novels to feel-good Hollywood rom-coms, our culture is saturated with rosy representations of love and intimacy. But all too often, our own love lives fail to meet these lofty ideals. So, is there something wrong with us? Well, not necessarily. We may just be looking for love in all the wrong ways. But there is a way to change this. These blinks explore how romantic relationships work in the real world and present a practical approach to building strong and stable bonds that won't lose their spark. Based on the clinical expertise of Alexandra H. Solomon, this guide shows us how finding love starts with understanding ourselves, our needs, and the unique patterns that shape our relationships. In these blinks, you'll learn

why you should interview your parents; how technology drives us apart; and what transforms good sex into great sex.

## **To truly love another, you must first understand yourself.**

Meet Alexia. At 26 years old, this young woman is starting to get into the swing of adult life. She's got a good job, a nice apartment, and a stable group of friends. But her love life is faltering. She's always dating men that leave her frustrated. One is too clingy, the next is aloof, another only cares about work. Now, it'd be easy to say these men are simply duds. But Alexia bears some responsibility as well. After all, she's the one picking them. If Alexia wants to forge a more fulfilling match, she'll have to examine her own beliefs and behaviors about love. The process of discovering how and why we love others is called relational self-awareness. And it's fundamental to any successful partnership. The key message here is: To truly love another, you must first understand yourself. Every relationship is a collaboration between two people; each partner contributes their own unique mix of qualities. When you date someone, you confront that person's personality, habits, and expectations about love. But your character and quirks also shape the union. In order to build a strong and stable pairing, you have to understand your own personality, needs, and desires – you must have relational self-awareness. Cultivating relational self-awareness often means looking backward. We learn a lot about love as children. Specifically, we learn from watching our parents and experiencing our own family dynamics. These early experiences shape how we approach intimacy as adults. If you had cold, distant parents, you might settle for a partner who is neglectful – or you might overcompensate and desire unrealistic levels of attention. Of course, these patterns aren't permanent. You can consciously adjust them with introspection and effort. One technique the author recommends is the name-connect-choose method. To practice this, first identify which relationship patterns you've learned from your parents. Next, consider how these early lessons may inform your current behaviors. Then, with this insight, actively work to overcome the habits you find harmful. When you reflect deeply on yourself and your history, you can start to better understand your core issues. Core issues are the personal vulnerabilities or soft spots that guide our intimate relationships. Your core issues may include a fear of abandonment, need for approval, or a recurring distrust of others. These can be difficult

to confront, but once you do, you'll be more able to grapple with their effects. We'll look at some proactive ways to approach these issues in the next blink.

"Your past is still with you – and always will be – and it shapes the lens through which you experience the present moment."

## **To change your mindset, tell yourself better and more accurate stories.**

Owen and Leticia got along perfectly – that is, until Owen forgot to pick up the car from the mechanic. This uncharacteristic, small slipup sent Leticia into a frenzy. She screamed, she yelled, she even called Owen names. She became a completely different person. Why did such a tiny mistake have such a big impact? Well, it has to do with Leticia's life story. You see, Leticia was raised by a single mother who put a lot of emphasis on personal responsibility. If young Leticia ever blundered, she received harsh lectures. Later, as an adult, she saw any error as a serious issue and began playing the role of a strict parent. What could Leticia do differently? Well, with a little self-awareness, she might see Owen's slipup in a different light – and learn to play a new role. The key message here is: To change your mindset, tell yourself better and more accurate stories. Whether consciously or not, we all understand our lives through the lens of stories. And, just like any fairy tale, these stories have characters, settings, themes, and plots. The stories we tell ourselves, and the roles we cast ourselves in, have a powerful impact on how we interact with the people we love. But these stories aren't always true, and often we repeat the same tales without realizing it. So, what story was Leticia telling herself when Owen forgot to pick up the car? It was a story she'd learned as a little girl. In this tale, any mistake was unacceptable. When Owen messed up, she immediately cast him as a careless, worthless person – just as her mother would have cast her. But imagine if Leticia saw a different story – one where Owen was a kind, compassionate partner who'd had a tough day and a single lapse in memory. Armed with this narrative, Leticia could probably react more calmly. Stories that are less black-and-white and more nuanced are called dialectic stories. In a dialectic story, Owen can be both forgetful and a good partner, and Leticia can feel mad and disappointed but also understanding and forgiving. Telling dialectic stories is useful because they more accurately represent reality and leave room for the characters to control and adjust their behavior. You're constantly growing and changing – as are the people and circumstances around you. So it's important to keep updating your internal stories with new, more accurate information. When this happens, and you acknowledge the shifts, you can adapt accordingly. And when you're open to new stories, you can guide your life toward a happier ending.

## **Your love life doesn't have to match cultural standards.**

Imagine you're a 25-year-old single woman living in a big American city. For many people these days, this is living the dream. You're young, you're free, and you can spend your week pursuing your career and your weekends partying with friends. But if you travel back in time 100 years, you get a completely different story. In 1920, a 25-year-old bachelorette might feel anxious or stigmatized. She might be receiving lots of

pressure to get married and have children before it's "too late." The truth is, how we approach love is mostly determined by the cultural norms around us. To find an authentic approach to love, it's important to critically examine these outside forces. The key message here is: Your love life doesn't have to match cultural standards. No matter where and when you're living, you're always thoroughly entangled in a wider cultural context. This culture is full of messages about how dating, relationships, and love should work. Sometimes the messages are explicit, such as with religious doctrines. But just as often, the rules of love are subtly built into community norms or represented in media like books, TV, and movies. And these cultural expectations don't always align with our authentic selves or desires. For instance, contemporary culture presents specific ideas about how each gender should act. Women are expected to be emotional, family-oriented, and looking for commitment, while men are supposed to be stoic, career-focused, and independent. But any given individual is unlikely to fit into these tightly prescribed boxes. This is true for everyone and especially relevant for people in the LGBT community who may have a more critical approach to gender norms. Culture can also give us unrealistic ideas about relationships in general. Institutions like Hollywood tend to present an idealized version of romance where passion trumps all. But, in reality, partnerships involve a lot of work, compromise, and even boredom. So people seeking some picture-perfect love story can find themselves disappointed and all-too-willing to give up at the slightest rough patch. When pursuing a relationship, don't take cultural norms as sacred. Carefully consider whether you actually agree with them - you may find some are useful and others are not. Perhaps you're a woman who likes sensitive men, or you're a man who would rather skip the office and be a stay-at-home dad. These types of choices are ultimately up to you.

## **No partner will completely fulfill all of your needs all of the time.**

Do you believe in soulmates? This can be a tough question - especially since there's no single definition for what a soulmate is. For some people, a soulmate is like the Yiddish concept bashert. A bashert is your ideal match, the person God created specifically for you. For others, a soulmate is like a fellow traveler - and a relationship only emerges through spending years and years together. For others still, a soulmate is like a wake-up call - it's the person who reinvigorates your love of life, even if just for a brief moment. Some of these conceptions of soulmates will resonate more with you than others. But one thing is true regardless: no relationship is free of hurdles. To form a lasting relationship, you'll need to put in the work - even with your soulmate. The key message here is: No partner will completely fulfill all of your needs all of the time. When we seek a romantic partner, there's sometimes an expectation that this person will be our ideal match in every way. But this lofty ideal can be dangerous. In fact, according to a study on couples by social psychologists Spike W. S. Lee and Norbert Schwartz, people who believe in perfect matches are more likely to be disappointed and dissatisfied in their relationships. This doesn't mean you should abandon the notion of soulmates. You can still aim to find your bashert or fellow traveler - just be prepared to put energy and effort into building a healthy relationship. Even if God has paired you with your optimal other half, you two will still have to navigate the trials and tribulations of life together. So how will you know if you've met the right partner? There's no exact answer, but sometimes you'll just know. While we like to think that our brains can solve every problem with logic or reasoning, our bodies can also be valuable sources of insight. The way you feel around someone matters. Listen to your gut instincts. If you have a deep

sensation of unease, maybe reconsider the partnership. On the other hand, if your gut says “yes,” you might be onto something. Of course, even the best partner won’t mirror you completely. In healthy relationships, both partners have friends, interests, and passions beyond the pairing. So don’t be discouraged if your soulmate doesn’t share your exact hobbies or has a social circle all of their own. You should encourage them to be true to themselves, and they should do the same for you.

## **Sex is completely natural, but good sex requires a bit of work.**

Let’s talk about sex. Should be easy, right? After all, the world around us is saturated with erotic imagery. Films regularly feature steamy sex scenes, pornography is always mere clicks away, and scantily clad bodies are used to advertise everything from cars to hamburgers. The problem is, all this tantalizing media can crowd out the most important authority on sexuality: ourselves. All too often, we’re so focused on what sex should be that we’re not in touch with our actual desires – and this disconnect can make physical intimacy difficult or unsatisfying. Luckily, like all aspects of romantic relationships, this tension around sex can be relieved with care, communication, and attention. The key message here is: Sex is completely natural, but good sex requires a bit of work. The plucky American actress Mae West famously described sex as “emotion in motion.” And she couldn’t have been more correct; sex, and in fact all forms of physical affection, are deeply entwined with our emotions. Touch – whether it’s a hug, a kiss, or something more intimate – is a powerful way to communicate and connect with another person. But before we begin feeling others, it’s imperative to get in touch with ourselves. Having good sex with a partner requires that you first understand your own sexuality. You have to feel comfortable in your own skin, know your own turn-ons and boundaries, and have a firm grasp on what types of touch bring you pleasure. Learning all this is an ongoing process, but it starts with spending time with yourself and exploring what feels good on your own terms. This may involve some trial and error, but it’s worth it in the end. Once you start to know your own needs, you’ll be better prepared to fully engage with a partner and to give and receive pleasure. This could be within a long-term relationship or with a more casual pairing – how you approach it is up to you. But be wary. Contemporary hook-up culture sometimes advocates casual sex with no communication or emotional involvement. This may work for some people, but for others it can lead to misunderstandings, hurt feelings, or other undesirable situations. Still, you shouldn’t be too wary. Everyone is entitled to the intimacy and pleasure that sex can bring. There’s nothing greedy, selfish, or shameful about desiring powerful erotic experiences. When you find the right partner – that is, someone you feel comfortable, vulnerable, and passionate with – your relationship will benefit from the strong physical connection that sex can bring.

## **Avoid emotional conflicts by creating spaces to process and reflect.**

It’s Saturday night, and you and your partner are at a boozy party across town. At some point during the soirée, you get separated. After some searching, you find her out on the balcony. She’s having an intimate chat with an attractive stranger – maybe a bit too intimate. What do you do? You could grab her by the wrist, drag her outside, and then



spend the whole ride home unloading a barrage of angry insults. Or you could take a passive-aggressive approach – pretend you didn't notice, but fill the next week with icy silence and snide remarks. Honestly, neither response is good. Both are reactive. That is, they're driven wholly by your initial emotional impulse. And that's a recipe for disaster. The key message here is: Avoid emotional conflicts by creating spaces to process and reflect. When we're faced with an unpleasant situation, our brains and bodies push us to react quickly. This impulse is guided by the primordial fight-or-flight response our ancestors developed to survive dangerous encounters. So, when trouble arises in an intimate relationship, we're moved to either fight – by, for example, yelling and shouting – or we're driven to flee by withdrawing and becoming avoidant. The problem is that both these responses make matters worse. They are impulsive reactions that push us away from our partners and heighten the tension in a relationship. A better solution involves creating space to process your emotions before taking action. A brief pause, like a deep breath or short walk, can help you see the situation more clearly – or at least let you approach the issue with less hostility and more empathy. When you take a reflective pause, you're able to transform a linear conflict story into a systemic conflict story. A linear conflict story is your simple read on a situation – in this example, you may feel your partner ditched you for a beautiful stranger. A systemic story includes more nuanced information that may not be so apparent. Maybe you're feeling insecure due to outside reasons, or maybe your partner didn't know many people at the party and was just glad to be socializing at all. Telling a systemic story opens space to talk through any conflict. And when you do get to talking, you need to choose your words carefully. Avoid intimacy-preventing traps. These are accusatory phrases like "You always . . ." or "Why didn't you . . . ?" Instead, try intimacy-inviting phrases like "I feel that . . ." or "What kept you from . . . ?" This softer language prevents black-and-white thinking by leaving space for everyone to express themselves with less judgment.

## **A sincere apology can make a relationship stronger.**

Let's drop in on Matt and Kevin. A few weeks ago, Kevin had an operation that left him temporarily immobilized. This means that Matt has been handling all the housework – he's been cooking the meals, watching the children, and even helping Kevin shower and dress. Needless to say, everyone is stressed. So it's no surprise that someone eventually snaps. In a fit of frustration, Kevin rudely chides Matt for a small mistake. Both partners glare at each other – the air is filled with tension. Then, something amazing happens: Kevin apologizes. He admits he was lashing out and thanks Matt for all his hard work. Suddenly, things are back to normal. The whole scene takes less than a minute, but it's the small moments like this that keep a relationship alive through hard times. The key message here is: A sincere apology can make a relationship stronger. Mistakes are inevitable – it's unfortunate, but true. No matter how hard you try, sooner or later you'll slip up, stumble, or act out. It might be a small gaffe, like forgetting to take out the trash or cracking a joke that just doesn't land. Or it could be a big indiscretion, like lying, cheating, or committing a crime. Now, even though each of these errors is definitely disappointing, a heartfelt apology can go a long way toward fixing them. The problem is, apologizing isn't always easy. In fact, it's a skill that must be learned. A good apology is sincere, specific, and creates accountability. For instance, if you say something hurtful to a partner, it wouldn't work to roll your eyes and declare, "Sorry I'm such a bad person." A more honest apology would be direct and acknowledge the pain you caused. It would sound something like, "I'm sorry for the comment I made. It

was unnecessary, and I'll be more thoughtful in the future." Sometimes, for bigger transgressions, more work is necessary. You may have to make an amends action. This is a purposeful action meant to demonstrate the depth of your regret – and to fix the pain you've caused. An amends action for someone who drunkenly cheated on their spouse could involve giving up drinking, perhaps by attending AA meetings. Such an action shows commitment to not making the same mistake again. But this is still only half of the story. The thing is, the way you receive an apology is just as crucial as how you give it. Heartfelt apologies should be met with heartfelt forgiveness. Forgiving someone doesn't mean you condone their actions, but it does show you're willing to move on. Practicing forgiveness also helps the one forgiving – carrying a grudge can prevent you from being able to experience the positive aspects of a relationship.

## **Relationships last when you strive to be fully present.**

When was the last time you looked at your phone? Be honest. Has it been an hour? Twenty minutes? Maybe it's only been 30 seconds. Don't feel too bad. In today's world, our electronic devices are our constant companions. They're fun and useful – but they can keep us from being truly present. When we're on the receiving end of a constant ping of notifications, we can become distracted from the people we're actually with. But it goes deeper, too. Social media saturation and the endless stream of potential matches on dating apps provide the illusion of infinite possibilities. We might forget what we have and always search for something better. Technology is an important way in which we can hamper our ability to be intimate. But it's not the only one. The key message here is: Relationships last when you strive to be fully present. Being fully present for a relationship means more than just sharing physical space with your partner. Presence involves being completely invested with both your mind and your heart. This means you're engaged, listening, and attentive when your loved one is around; it also means you're emotionally available and empathetic when they're expressing inner thoughts and feelings. Of course, being present is a two-way street. To be fully present, you also need to be open to receiving love, kindness, and support from your partner. This can be more difficult than it sounds. Sometimes, we can get so caught up in our own negative feelings or internal battles that we reject any attempt at closeness. When this happens, we shut people out when we should be letting them in. That's why it's crucial to practice self-compassion. Self-compassion is the act of acknowledging your own values and virtues as a person. It involves being kind to yourself when you fail, recognizing the struggles you share with others, and practicing mindfulness when you feel discouraged or overwhelmed. In a nutshell, when you're self-compassionate, you're treating yourself as you would treat a dear friend or loved one. Practicing self-compassion goes hand in hand with recognizing the limits of your control. When things aren't going your way, it's easy to get discouraged or fixated on how things should be different. Maybe you're stressed at work, or you and your partner are having a fight. In these moments it's essential to accept that these things happen, and that life is a series of ebbs and flows, of ups and downs. Sometimes, you have to step back and appreciate life – and love – for what they truly are: ongoing processes.

## **Final summary**

The key message in these blinks is that: Finding and maintaining a relationship isn't

always easy. But there are a few valuable skills that can make pairing up a little simpler. Start by practicing relational self-awareness, which means reflecting on what patterns and expectations you bring to the table. Then, as you navigate your relationship, be mindful of the unrealistic or undesirable pressures society may force on you. And, finally, always aim to approach your partner with openness, compassion, and a loving presence. And here's some more actionable advice: Ask your parents! Now that you're an adult, it might be valuable to look back at your childhood with a little more distance. If you can, talk to your parents about their experiences. By reflecting on their struggles and triumphs, you may see old patterns in a new light. You might also get some great advice from people who have been through a lot together. Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to [email protected] with Loving Bravely as the subject line and share your thoughts!