



Married to Distraction: How to Restore Intimacy and Strengthen Your Partnership in an Age of Interruption

By Edward M. Hallowell M.D., Sue Hallowell, Melissa Orlov

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Are you more distant from your spouse than you'd like to be? Do you or your spouse waste time mindlessly viewing email or surfing the Web? Welcome to the club! Modern marriage is busy, distracted, and overloaded to extremes, with ever-increasing lists of things to do, superficial electronic connections, and interrupted moments. The good news is that there are straightforward and effective ways to restore communication and connection, resurrect happiness and romance, and strengthen—even save—a marriage.

- Observe the natural sequence of sustaining love: attention, time, connection, and play.
- Develop and nurture empathy—the essential building block to healthy communication.
- Carve out small moments of uninterrupted attention for each other.
- Identify the pressures that our crazybusy lifestyles put on love and marriage, and fight back with tenderness and appreciation.

Complete with scripts, tips, communication techniques, and a detailed 30-day reconnection plan, as well as inspiring real-life stories, *Married to Distraction* will set couples on a course of understanding, healing, and love.

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Editorial Review

Review

“I urge all people who yearn for more in their marriages to read this book—in particular, those hungry to move beyond conflict and condemnation to connection and understanding.”—Judith Warner, author of *Perfect Madness*

“Wise and compassionate . . . This is a unique, engaging, and profoundly helpful book. It can save a marriage or simply help people in happy marriages get closer and feel more fulfilled.”—Suzy Welch, author of *10-10-10: A Life-Transforming Idea*

“This timely book could save your marriage.” —Maggie Jackson, author of *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*

“Clear-sighted wisdom . . . Those in search of practical, concrete advice for creating and saving marriages will find what they need.”—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

About the Author

Edward M. Hallowell, M.D., was an instructor at Harvard Medical School for twenty years and is now the director of the Hallowell Centers in Seattle, San Francisco, New York City, and the Boston area. He is the co-author of *Driven to Distraction*, *Delivered from Distraction*, and *Answers to Distraction*, as well as the author of *CrazyBusy*, *The Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness*, and *Worry*, among other titles. He also hosts a weekly podcast called *Distraction* that offers practical solutions on how to focus and regain control in today's digital world.

Sue George Hallowell, LICSW, has been a practicing couples' therapist for more than twenty-five years. The Hallowells are the parents of three teenage children. They live in Arlington, Massachusetts.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Chapter One

The Anatomy of Modern Love

Praised be the fathomless universe, For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious, And for love, sweet love--but praise! praise! praise! --WALT WHITMAN

You've picked up this book for a reason. Your concern is love.

You've likely hit a snag, maybe a small one, maybe large. Human intimacy is so complex, so coiled and convoluted, that it's hard not to hit a snag. Most of us hit snags all the time in our dealings with others, especially those we are closest to. So, if you've hit a snag, just hang on. Keep up the effort. Anyone who tells

you it's easy to stay together over the long haul has never done it. If you're still taking it seriously and working at it, your efforts will pay off as long as you have a plan that makes sense. It's not enough just to take it seriously and work at it. Some people work at it their whole lives long and get nowhere. To help your efforts to keep your love alive and your marriage intact, we offer a plan based on what we know works best.

When a couple is in a good place, each partner feels secure and fulfilled. To feel secure and fulfilled in a relationship, both people need to feel:

* that the other person thinks highly of them. * that the other person cares deeply for them. *that the other person thinks they are proficient at something.

Beyond that, for love to become what we all want it to become, a smile should cross your face when you think of your mate. You ought to think of him or her as someone you have fun with, someone you look forward to seeing, someone who for an undefinable reason makes life feel special. You want to feel that he or she casts a glow into your life that makes you feel good, no matter what else might be going on.

When all goes right, a natural sequence of five steps leads to such happiness in love. Each step should usher in the next, but, as we will later describe, modern life tends to snag each one. The steps are:

1. Attention 2. Time 3. Empathy 4. Connection 5. Play

Love begins in attention. Love begins when you notice another person. Love starts with a catching of your eye. Be it on some enchanted evening across a crowded room, or via an ad on Match.com, some signal--somehow--draws your attention to one person and not to another. No one has ever figured out exactly why and how this happens when and where it does--but it does, and has done so since the dawn of time.

In today's world, distractions interrupt attention all the time. The basic prerequisite of love--attention--can seem impossible to give or get.

Once you have each other's attention--no small feat--the next step toward love is to sustain that attention over time. Without sustained attention, love cannot grow. On the other hand, too much attention can snuff it out. While some people purport to know the right proportions in advance, each love is different, which is why there is no one recipe and why "prescriptions for finding love" offered by "experts" so often fail.

Giving and receiving attention becomes a kind of dance as love grows. Now you see me, now you don't. Playing hard to get. Don't be too easy. If you want me, you'll have to pursue me. At this stage, attention is often focused on the other in absentia. Resisting picking up the phone to make the call. Deliberately avoiding the other person while thinking about him or her day and night. Preoccupied by the other person, but keeping a certain distance. This is the dance of developing love.

Once again, our age of distraction can disrupt the dance. If you don't have time to ponder and wonder, if you don't have time to approach and avoid and put your heart into it, then love will falter here, not because you are a mismatch but because you have not created sufficient focus for love to grow.

Attention given and received in proper measure over time, a recipe that varies from couple to couple, leads to a deeper interest in and a greater knowledge of the other person, which constitutes understanding and empathy.

Mutual empathy creates a connection. It is impossible to overestimate the power of connection at its

strongest. It drives life. But it cannot develop if people are unable to sustain attention over time. Such a mundane obstacle--distraction--ruins millions of potentially intimate relationships in our modern age.

But if you are able to create genuine connection, you've got it made. This is the great reward of love. In connection, you feel safe enough to become vulnerable. You feel safe enough to let go and to play. Play is the main action of true love. By play we mean any activity in which your imagination comes alive.

Play often begets its cousin, celebration. New research shows that more important than being there for your partner when times are tough is being there for your partner when times are good. The study found that being excited and happy for your partner when he or she brings home good news was a stronger predictor of the strength of the relationship than being stalwart when bad news hits.

Being able to play and to celebrate--being able to have fun together--are far more important than most people believe. They are a cornerstone of all great relationships.

As we have mentioned and will continue to show, the conditions of modern life threaten all five of the steps we've named, which in turn threatens the vibrancy and power of your love--not because you are mismatched, not because you are impaired people, but simply because today's world sets unique traps that can derail even the best relationships.

Of course, we don't know exactly how the help you'll find here will help you because we don't know the particulars of your situation. You may be in great distress, or just a little worried. Whatever the case, you probably want to get more from your marriage (or other close relationship) than you are currently getting. This book will help you in that regard. If you follow the suggestions we offer in these pages, it will be impossible for you not to develop a closer and more enjoyable relationship. And don't worry, the suggestions are not at all difficult to implement. You won't have to learn a foreign language or join a new religion. All you really have to do is set aside some time. Not easy, but possible, right? You may believe your marriage is basically good, but it could use a tweak. Or you might feel like the person who once said to Ned, "I know my marriage is just fine . . . until I stop and think about it."

There is likely love in your marriage, and we will build on that love. But even if you think there is no love, we will help you search out what's positive. At the heart of our method is the identification and development of what's already good. You wouldn't be with your partner if you didn't once have love, or something like love, but that love might now not be so easy to find.

As one of Ned's patients once said, "My husband and I work so hard to get everything done, we're like a small business, and businesses don't run on love. Earn the money, take care of the kids, keep up the house, do the holidays and birthdays and celebrations, bake the cookies, do the school and homework thing, keep up with the relatives, you know the drill. With all there is to get done, I sometimes ask myself, 'But where's the love?' You know, like, get real, who has time for that?"

At times we're simply too busy to pay attention to the people we love the most. We take them for granted. There's just so much to do. You may be exasperated at how difficult it has become to get your spouse's full attention or to find some enjoyable chunk of time for yourselves together, time when you're both fully present.

Life has also become so insecure, so fraught with worry and uncertainty, that it can be difficult to connect romantically. You may feel as if you are handling one crisis after another, or at best, one worry after another.

We do live in worried times. So, you're probably not only looking for deeper love but also for greater stability . . . in a world where neither love nor stability is easy to find.

You also may be hoping for some fun. But today, fun often gives way to fear. As you read this, you may be wondering if any of the hopes we've mentioned are realistically possible given the frenzy and anxiety of modern life and all the stuff you have to do just to stay afloat. Marital bliss may seem like a preposterous pipe dream, not an attainable goal. Perhaps marital bliss is hyperbole, but genuine joy in a marriage is a goal that we believe any person can reach. We believe the pipe dream is not preposterous. We will show you what you can do to overcome many of the obstacles marriages and other intimate relationships face these days.

We want to connect with you, no matter where you are emotionally. As we wrote the book, we always imagined your side of the conversation, your concerns, your needs, and we tried to anticipate what you might want to know. We've looked at marriage in a modern context, your context.

One of the most jarring facts about modern life is how angry, contentious, and unfriendly it can be. Thanks to technology, we live in an age of instant gotcha!--an age of nonstop gossip and muckraking streaming endlessly across screens worldwide, an age of disappearing privacy and mounting mistrust, an age of witty ridicule in which the clever put-down gets attention, while the pat on the back seems hokey and obsolete.

Yet, most of us would like a pat on the back as well as some harmony in our lives. Aren't you tired of exposes, fallen heroes, corrupt leaders, and broken promises? Wouldn't you like someone you can truly believe in? Don't look at the news to find that person. Look homeward. Look to your friends. Most of all, look to your mate. These days it is best to create your own safe haven, your own network of positive connections, your local protection against the storm of data and disappointments we call the news.

In addition to distemper, our age is unique in its unprecedented levels of distraction and worry. Our daily lives so burst with information and random, ominous data that for a fact, opinion, or idea to penetrate past our eyeballs and into our minds, it must arrive at high speed with armor-piercing barbs. Friendliness is too slow and unbarbed to get in. There's no "hook" to civility. That's why it's going the way of the rotary telephone and the handwritten thank-you note. We need noise, conflict, bad news, disagreement, another person's pain, even our own pain . . . then we pay attention.

As such rancor rises, many of us feel an unmet need for some kind words, but we hesitate to ask for them or even to offer them, lest we seem feeble, passe, or vulnerable.

Yet the success of marriages and all other close relationships depends upon slowing down enough and opening up enough to create a space that welcomes simple, kind words. Such words are hard to find "out there." We will help you find them and create them, wherever you may be.

Unlike the dream of getting rich, or getting famous, or winning the Nobel Prize, or making it to the major leagues, or living to the age of 110, the dream of love is a dream every person in the world can make come true. Don't give up on it.

If you've read this far, you haven't. But you're a little frustrated--or maybe a lot frustrated--with your difficulty in turning your relationship into what it could be or keeping it where you want it to be. Warmth and intimacy require daily effort . . . but who has time? There are bigger worries to worry about than love. You resonated with the title, *Married to Distraction*, and thought to yourself, "Yes! That's it! It's that simple, but that difficult! If we could just make each other a priority . . . if we could just connect for more than a minute or two . . ."

You may be frustrated by your partner's tendency to disappear, literally or figuratively, in the middle of what you thought was an important conversation or project. You're probably wondering what in the world you have to do to hold on to his or her attention long enough to connect in the ways you so dearly want to connect. You may be trying to figure out how you, yourself, can be more mentally present and engaged with the person or people you love, while still doing all the gazillion things that you have to do every day. There's so much to worry about. Where can love fit in? Isn't love a luxury, a frill for the idle rich? (Lest you believe that, by the way, one of the few rock-solid findings in sociology is the lack of correlation between wealth and happiness. Once your income rises above the poverty level, increasing levels of income do not predict increasing levels of joie de vivre. Sure, we'd all like to be part of the experiment, but it's been done, and done many times!)

You may also wonder if you simply want too much from your marriage. You may say to yourself, "Maybe this day-to-day distance is what a real-life relationship is usually like. Perhaps I just need to face that romance is for fairy tales and real life is more like novels where everyone is unhappy and frustrated, and the smartest characters are the ones who accept the unavoidable limitations of life. Maybe the best I can hope for is to avoid disasters and make do with what I've got."

Even so, you do want more. That is a healthy instinct, not a greedy one. It is good to want the most from love. You don't want to give up on your dream, and you shouldn't. You wonder why you have to spend so much time doing grunt work, tending to the chores of life--from taking out the trash to getting people to where they need to be to paying bills to getting the dog's claws clipped--and have so little time to enjoy the closeness you desire in your number one relationship. You may feel that a feast is going on in the main room, but you're always stuck eating in the kitchen alone.

You may feel as if you carry far more than your fair share of the workload, and you're more than just a little bit tired of it. You want to be part of a connected team, not two people working in parallel. You want to enjoy the feast together. As well you should!

From the Hardcover edition.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Gloria Robey:

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