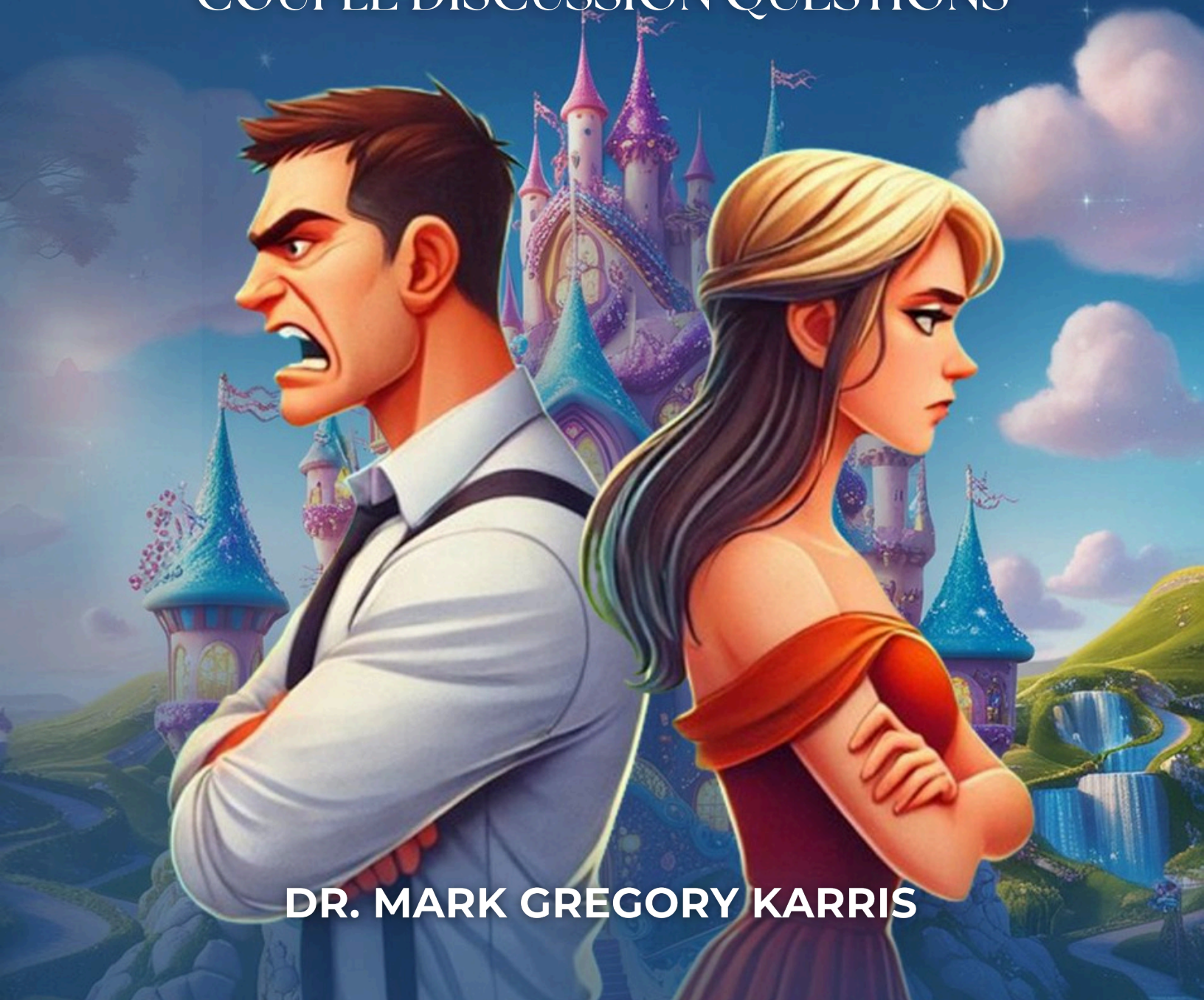
Beyond Fairy Tales

A Couple's Guide to Finding Clarity, Doing the Work, and Building a Lasting Relationship

COUPLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



DR. MARK GREGORY KARRIS

Chapter One

"The End of Fairy Tales and Embracing the Real Us"

1. Reflecting on Fairy Tales: How do you think fairy-tale narratives have influenced your expectations of love and relationships? In what ways do you feel these expectations have helped or hindered our relationship?

2. Idealization vs. Reality: When did you first begin to notice that our relationship wasn't the fairy tale you might have imagined? How did that realization impact your connection with me?

3. Challenges in Love: What are some of the most significant challenges you feel we've faced in our relationship? How did those challenges affect your view of love and of me?

4. Myths of Love: Which myths about love and relationships do you think you have internalized? How do you think these myths have created tension or disillusionment in our relationship?

5. Navigating Differences: How do you think we manage the differences between us, such as our personalities, preferences, or communication styles? How do you feel these differences either strengthen or challenge our relationship?

Chapter One

"The End of Fairy Tales and Embracing the Real Us"

6. Expectations of Perfection: Have you ever unconsciously felt that I should "complete" you or make you perfectly happy? What if, instead of expecting our relationship to always be perfect, we embraced the reality that difficult times are a natural part of our journey together?

7. Facing Life's Toughness Together: How do you think we support each other during life's difficult moments? What strategies do you think have been effective in maintaining our bond during stressful times?

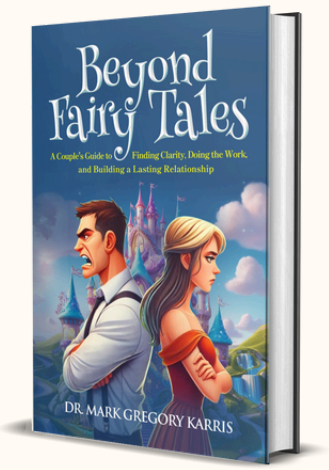
8. The Role of Community: How do you think our sense of community—whether through friends, family, or social groups—affects us as individuals and as a couple? Do you feel we would benefit from a broader support network? What challenges do we face in building and maintaining a strong community?

9. Dealing with Disappointment: How do you think we handle disappointments within our relationship? What steps do you think we can take to turn these moments into opportunities for growth and deeper connection?

10. Embracing Reality: How do you think we can work together to embrace the realities of our relationship, moving beyond the myths and toward a more authentic and fulfilling connection?

Chapter Two

"Discovering Each Other's Operating Manual"



1. **Attachment Style Identification:** What attachment style do you believe you have, and why do you think that's the case? How do you think these might be influenced by your early attachment experiences?

2. **Trigger Awareness:** What specific situations or behaviors from me tend to trigger a strong emotional response in you?

3. **Attachment in Conflict:** Reflect on a time when we experienced a conflict. How do you think our individual attachment styles played a role in the way that conflict unfolded?

4. **Emotional Comfort:** How comfortable are you with discussing your emotions with me? What do you think your comfort or discomfort in these conversations reveals about your attachment style?

5. **Caregiver Influence:** In what ways do you see your early relationships with your parents influencing how you respond to me in moments of stress or disconnection? Provide examples.

Chapter Two

"Discovering Each Other's Operating Manual"

6. Making Sense of Behaviors: What are some behaviors or responses from me that you initially found confusing or frustrating, but that make more sense now that you understand my attachment style?

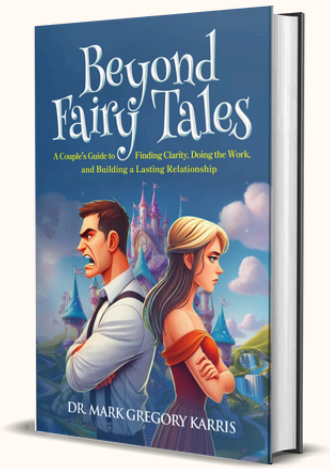
7. Perceptions in Conflict: What unspoken fears or insecurities might be influencing how we perceive each other during moments of conflict? How do these perceptions shape our interactions?

8. Out of Character Actions: Can you discuss a time when my actions seemed out of character to you? How do you think this might have been a response to an underlying fear or insecurity rooted in my attachment history?

9. Building Security: How do you think understanding each other's operating manuals can help us both feel more secure and understood in our relationship? What specific actions can we take to apply this understanding?

10. Supporting Each Other: What strategies do you think we can develop together to better support each other's attachment needs during challenging times in our relationship?

Chapter Three



"Awakening the Gift of Reflective Empathic Compassion"

1. Understanding the Honeymoon Phase: How do you think our relationship evolved from the honeymoon phase, where empathy and compassion were abundant, to where it is now? What changes have you noticed in how we connect emotionally?

2. Reflective Curiosity: When was the last time you genuinely reflected on my inner world? What makes it challenging to do so? What do you think is happening in my life right now that might be influencing my emotions and behaviors?

3. Empathy in Action: Can you recall a recent moment when you truly felt what I was feeling? How did that impact you to connect with me so deeply?

4. Compassionate Listening: How often do we listen to each other with the intent to truly understand feelings rather than just respond? What makes it challenging? What shifts might we notice in our connection if we were more intentional in our empathic listening?

5. Mirror Neurons and Connection: Have there been moments when we seemed to pick up on each other's feelings without needing words? Can you give an example? How did that shared emotional connection strengthen our bond?

Chapter Three

"Awakening the Gift of Reflective Empathic Compassion"

6. Compassion in Action: Can you recall a time when you felt I showed deep compassion towards you? How did it make you feel?

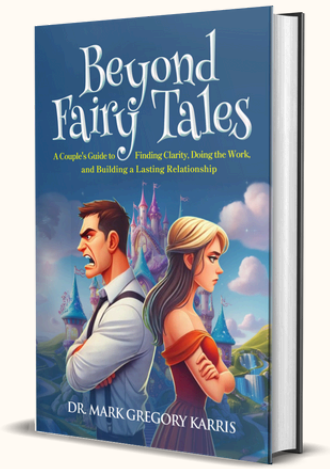
7. Healing Attachment Injuries: Have there been moments in our relationship where you felt deeply hurt by me? How do you think understanding these moments as attachment injuries can help us both heal and rebuild trust?

8. Scuba Diving Conversations: How do you think setting aside regular time for "scuba diving" conversations—where we explore each other's emotional and mental landscapes—would impact our relationship? What questions would you want to ask me, or have me ask you?

9. Expressing Compassionate Apologies: Reflect on a time when we shared a meaningful apology with each other. How did it feel for both of us? What essential elements contribute to an effective apology? How does empathy influence the impact of our apologies?

10. Priority Compassion: What is one of you core concerns that you feel I haven't addressed as fully as you could? How do you think actively addressing this concern might change the dynamics of our relationship?

Chapter Four



"What Is Your Negative Cycle?"

1. Identifying the Dance: How would you describe the way we interacted in the early stages of our relationship? What do we think shifted over time that led to feelings of disconnection?

2. Recognizing the Cycle: When disagreements arise, do you notice a recurring pattern or negative cycle in our relationship? How do you think this cycle typically unfolds?

3. Emotional Triggers: What do you think are the common triggers that initiate our negative cycle? How do these triggers impact your behavior towards me?

4. Self-Protection Mode: How do you typically protect yourself emotionally during conflicts with me? Without judging one another, do you notice yourself becoming more focused on your own needs rather than mine?

5. Shifting Blame to the Cycle: How does viewing the negative cycle as the enemy, rather than me, change your perspective on conflicts?

Chapter Four

"What Is Your Negative Cycle?"

6. Common Patterns: Which of the four negative cycles (*Blame and Bash*, *Fracture and Fortify*, *Wend, Whirl, and Withdraw*, *Pull Back and Protest*) resonates most with our relationship? Do you think you can identify with more than one?

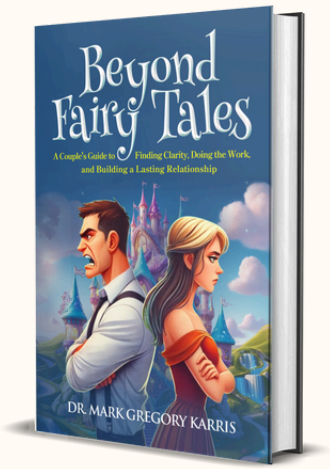
7. Basic Moves of Your Cycle: Can you describe the basic moves of our negative cycle? How do your actions and mine feed into this cycle?

8. Reversing the Order: When you reverse the order, starting with my actions, how does the cycle look? Does this change how you understand our dynamic?

9. Impact on Empathy and Connection: How do you think being caught in a negative cycle affects your ability to feel empathy and connection with me? What feelings arise for you when the cycle is at its worst?

10. Breaking the Cycle: What steps do you think we can take together to interrupt our negative cycle and foster a more positive, loving interaction? How can we support each other in this process?

Chapter Five



"What Is the Anatomy of Your Negative Cycle?"

1. Understanding Your Inner Threat Detector: How do you think your brain's internal threat detection system impacts your interactions with me? Can you recall a recent situation where you felt it activate?

2. Identifying Triggers: What are some your most common triggers in our relationship? Do you think these triggers are more situational, historical, relational, or internal?

3. Recognizing Emotional Responses: When you are triggered, what emotions do you typically experience first? How do these emotions shape your behavior towards me in the moment?

4. Distinguishing Primary and Secondary Emotions: In moments of conflict, do you notice yourself expressing secondary emotions, such as anger or frustration, instead of the more vulnerable primary emotions like sadness or fear? What are your more vulnerable emotions when you feel disconnected from me?

5. Physiological Reactions: What physical sensations do you experience during conflict with me? How do you think these bodily reactions influence your emotional state and behavior?

Chapter Five

“What Is the Anatomy of Your Negative Cycle?”

6. Mapping Your Behaviors: What behaviors do you engage in when you’re caught in a negative cycle with me? How do you think these actions contribute to the continuation of the cycle?

7. Exploring Negative Narratives: What negative thoughts or beliefs about me or our relationship tend to arise during conflicts? How do these narratives influence your feelings and actions?

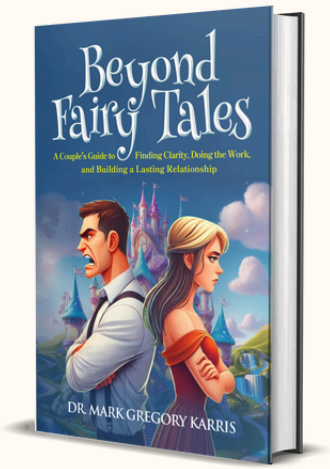
8. Examining Contextual Factors: What external factors, such as stress at work or cultural expectations, do you think might be contributing to our negative cycle? How do these factors complicate our interactions?

9. Connecting Relationship Longings: What deeper relationship longings do you think are hidden beneath your emotional reactions and behaviors? How can understanding these needs help us break free from the negative cycle?

10. Breaking the Cycle Together: Now that we’ve mapped the anatomy of our negative cycle, what steps do you think we can take together to interrupt the cycle before it spirals out of control?

Chapter Six

“Strengthening Your Connection“



1. Proactive Commitment: What pact we can make a pact to prioritize our emotional connection in our relationship? What would it say? What specific actions or routines do you think we can implement to maintain this connection consistently?

2. Importance of Friendship: In what ways do you feel we currently support each other as friends? What are the qualities of a friendship that you desire with me?

3. Understanding Relational Tendencies: How do you think your relational tendencies (anxious, avoidant, or secure) influence your interactions with me? How do you think you can better tailor your approach to meet my emotional needs?

4. Love Languages: What do you think are your primary love languages in this season of our relationship? How do you think we can actively fill each other’s love tank in ways that are meaningful to both of us?

5. Launchings and Landings: What daily rituals do you think we can incorporate to create meaningful launchings and landings in our relationship? How do you think these rituals will impact our emotional connection?

Chapter Six

"Strengthening Your Connection"

6. Balancing Individual Needs: How do you balance your need for independence with the need for connection in our relationship? What adjustments do you think we can make to ensure both needs are respected and met?

7. Incorporating Play: What are some playful activities or hobbies you think we can try together to bring more fun and novelty into our relationship? How do you think this can help reignite our connection?

8. Navigating Conflict: How do you think we currently handle conflicts? What strategies from this chapter do you think we can use to navigate disagreements more effectively while protecting our emotional bond?

9. Expressing Gratitude: What are your thoughts on expressing gratitude to each other more often? How do you think we can make this a regular practice to enhance our connection and appreciation for each other?

10. Creating New Traditions: What new traditions or rituals do you think we can create together to celebrate our relationship and deepen our connection?

Chapter Seven

"Employing Effective Communication"

1. Identifying the Four Horsemen: Which of the Four Horsemen (criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling) do you recognize in our relationship? How do you think we can work together to eliminate these behaviors?

2. Using "I Feel … When You" Statements: How comfortable are you with expressing your feelings using the "I feel … when you" format? Can you think of a recent situation where this approach could have improved the communication between us?

3. We-Centered Language: How often do you think we use *we-centered* language? How do you think adopting a team-based narrative could shift the way we approach conflicts or challenges in our relationship?

4. Tone, Timing, and Trimming: Reflect on a recent conversation where tone, timing, or trimming might have affected the outcome. What adjustments do you think we can make in future discussions to enhance effective communication?

5. Creating a Mantra: What mantra do you think we can create together to replace the Four Horsemen in our communication? How do you think we can integrate this mantra into our daily interactions?

Chapter Seven

"Employing Effective Communication"

6. Beginner's Mind in Listening: How do you think preconceived notions impact your ability to listen to me? What steps do you think we can take to approach conversations with a beginner's mind?

7. Reflection and Active Listening: How well do you feel heard and understood in our relationship? What changes do you think we can make to improve our reflective and active listening skills?

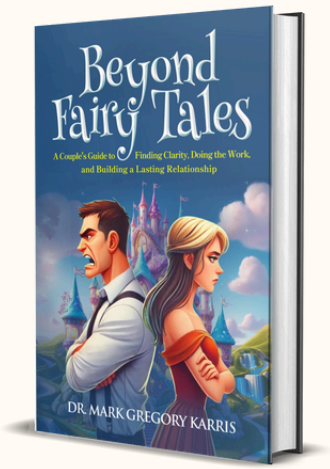
8. Validation: In what ways do you think you can validate my feelings and experiences during conversations? How do you think validation contributes to a more secure and connected relationship?

9. Engaging with Love: Who in your life embodies warmth, nurturing, and love? How do you personally define love? When you say you love me, what does that mean to you?

10. Progress Over Perfection: How might our relationship evolve if we viewed imperfections and missteps as opportunities for growth and maturity, rather than signs of something being terribly wrong between us?

Chapter Eight

“Unleashing Your Inner Cycle Slayer”



1. Identifying Your Cycle: What name have we given to our negative cycle? How do you think naming it helps in recognizing and addressing the cycle when it arises?

2. SANE Approach: How do you think we can apply the SANE approach (See, Accept, Name, Engage) when we notice the negative cycle starting? Can you share a recent example where this approach would have helped us interrupt the cycle?

3. Healthy Time-Outs: How comfortable are you with taking a healthy time-out during heated discussions? What can we do to ensure that these time-outs are effective and beneficial for both of us?

4. Self-Soothing Strategies: During time-outs, what self-soothing activities can you engage in that could be effective? How do you think these practices can help you return to the conversation with a clearer mind and more empathy?

5. Attachment Injuries: Is there an attachment injury that you still need to express to me? Can you share with me, gently and slowly, how I hurt you and what you felt in that situation, and what I can do to make it better?

Chapter Eight

"Unleashing Your Inner Cycle Slayer"

6. Healing Conversations: Reflecting on the Eight Essential Steps to Healing Conversations, which step do you find most challenging, and why?

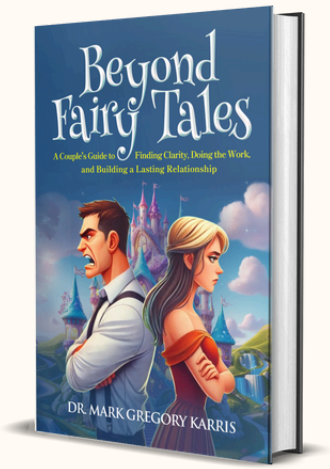
7. Communicating Needs: How do you feel about the way I communicate my needs during moments of stress or conflict? What can I do to make sure your needs are heard and respected during these times?

8. Vulnerability in Communication: How does returning to a conversation with vulnerability, as described in Step 5, change the dynamics of our relationship? What fears or challenges do you face when trying to be open and vulnerable with me?

9. Managing Conflict with Respect: How can we handle conflicts in a way that maintains respect and love, even when we're angry or hurt? What boundaries do we need to set to ensure that our disagreements don't damage our relationship?

10. Progress in Cycle-Slaying: How do you think we can start working together to become cycle slayers? What specific changes would you hope to see in our relationship once we begin addressing the negative cycle together?

Chapter Nine



"Cultivating a Healthier You (For a Healthier We)"

1. Self-Compassion Exploration: Do you find it challenging to practice self-compassion? If so, why do you think that is? What are some ways you can cultivate more self-compassion in your life?

2. Yin and Yang Balance: Reflecting on the concepts of Yin and Yang self-compassion, which do you find yourself leaning toward more often? How do you think balancing both forms of self-compassion could improve our relationship?

3. Managing Triggers: How do you think your past wounds and inner child experiences influence your reactions in conflicts with me?

4. Inner Child Awareness: What insights do you think you might gain from connecting with your inner child during our conflicts? How do you think this awareness could shift the way you approach those conflicts in the future?

5. Integrating Self-Compassion and Inner Child Work: How do you envision integrating the practices of self-compassion and inner child nurturing into our relationship on a regular basis?

Chapter Nine

“Cultivating a Healthier You (For a Healthier We)”

6. Mutual Support: How do you think we can support each other in recognizing and addressing our inner child’s needs? What strategies do you think we can use to create a safe space for this exploration together?

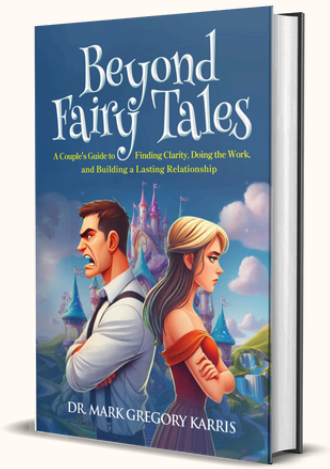
7. Recognizing Core Values: What do you think are your top five core values in the context of our relationship? How do you currently embody these values, and how do you think you might strengthen them in our daily interactions?

8. Valued Loving: Discuss a time when you acted in alignment with your values, even when it was challenging. How do you think this decision affected our relationship?

9. Choice Points: Reflect on a recent conflict or challenge in our relationship. What choice points did you face, and how do you think your decisions aligned (or didn’t align) with your core values?

10. Long-Term Growth: Considering the chapter’s emphasis on self-compassion, inner child work, and living by your values, what long-term changes do you hope to see in yourself and in our relationship as a result of embracing these practices?

Chapter Ten



"Revitalizing Your Sexual Connection"

1. Identifying Barriers: What specific stressors or attachment injuries do you think have impacted our sexual connection? How do you think we can address these barriers together?

2. Stress and Intimacy: How do you think we typically respond to stress, and how do you think this affects our sexual relationship? What small or big steps do you think we can take to reduce stress and create more space for intimacy?

3. Scheduling Intimacy: How do you feel about the idea of scheduling intimacy? In what ways do you think this practice could enhance our relationship, and how might we overcome any resistance to it?

4. Challenging Negative Narratives: What cultural, religious, or family narratives about sex do you think have influenced our relationship? How do you think we can work together to challenge and replace these narratives with more empowering beliefs?

5. Communication in the Bedroom: How comfortable are you discussing sexual preferences, boundaries, and desires with me? What do you think we can do to foster more open and honest communication about our sexual relationship?

Chapter Ten

"Revitalizing Your Sexual Connection"

6. Desire Dynamics: How do you experience spontaneous versus responsive desire in our sexual relationship? How can we better understand and honor these differences to create a more fulfilling connection for both of us?

7. Relational Fantasies: What sexual fantasies or desires would you like to share with me? How can we ensure that exploring these together feels safe, open, and free from judgment?

8. Understanding Sexual Desires: How do you think our sexual desires and preferences align or differ? How do you think we can create a more harmonious sexual connection that honors both of our needs?

9. Exploring Accelerators and Brakes: What do you think are the "accelerators" and "brakes" in our sexual relationship? How do you think we can maximize the accelerators and minimize the brakes to enhance our intimacy and connection?

10. Creating Your Sexual Masterpiece: How do you envision our sexual relationship evolving? What steps do you think we can take to embrace our authentic desires and create a fulfilling sexual connection together?