



The Science of Trust: Emotional Attunement for Couples

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For the past thirty-five years, John Gottman's research has been internationally recognized for its unprecedented ability to precisely measure interactive processes in couples and to predict the long-term success or failure of relationships. In this groundbreaking book, he presents a new approach to understanding and changing couples: a fundamental social skill called "emotional attunement," which describes a couple's ability to fully process and move on from negative emotional events, ultimately creating a stronger relationship.

Gottman draws from this longitudinal research and theory to show how emotional attunement can downregulate negative affect, help couples focus on positive traits and memories, and even help prevent domestic violence. He offers a detailed intervention devised to cultivate attunement, thereby helping couples connect, respect, and show affection. Emotional attunement is extended to tackle the subjects of flooding, the story we tell ourselves about our relationship, conflict, personality, changing relationships, and gender. Gottman also explains how to create emotional attunement when it is missing, to lay a foundation that will carry the relationship through difficult times.

Gottman encourages couples to cultivate attunement through awareness, tolerance, understanding, non-defensive listening, and empathy. These qualities, he argues, inspire confidence in couples, and the sense that despite the inevitable struggles, the relationship is enduring and resilient.

This book, an essential follow-up to his 1999 *The Marriage Clinic*, offers therapists, students, and researchers detailed intervention for working with couples, and offers couples a roadmap to a stronger future together.

The Science of Trust: Emotional Attunement for Couples Details

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Caroline says

First of all, in order to really appreciate this book, you've got to know its intended audience. This is no "Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work" (which I recommend to just about everyone). This doesn't even seem like it was written for clinicians. This is a book detailing Gottman's research and mathematical/statistical work in creating a coherent theory regarding trust in marriage relationships. Thus, it is DENSE. It starts with an overly thorough discussion of how to use game theory in order to develop a metric for measuring trust that, while foundational for the overall thrust of the book, is really hard/boring to get through. It ends with a really technical discussion of how he used mathematics in order to study couples' interactions and predict marriage success or breakdown. If you can press on through these two sections, what's left is very important, interesting, and necessary for those of us who work with couples to know. Some of it is a recap of what he has discussed in his other books, but he does a great job of synthesizing his previous work with new research findings and the work of other recent theorists (including Sue Johnson, my personal fave).

I give this five stars based on its (incredibly important) contribution to the field of couples counseling, not necessarily on how enjoyable it was to read. Know what you're getting yourself into and give yourself permission to skim when it gets dense; you will gain a lot from this book.

Erika RS says

I'll start off by noting that this was a terrible choice to get as an audio book. The target audience of this book is professional relationship counselors and researchers. As such, it has its fair share of math and acronyms. Nothing terrible, but when you've forgotten -- yet again -- what CL-ALT is, it would be nice to be able to flip back and look it up.

The other thing about this book is that, for the reasons mentioned above, it isn't an easy read. Although I haven't read it, from the description I suspect that the newer What Makes Love Last? is Gottman's version of this data for a more general audience.

What makes this book particularly valuable is that, while Gottman's research focuses on trust in couples, much of the information feels like it would generalize to trust in other settings. This feeling is supported by the fact that much of the material he discusses is not related to couples -- such as the work of Anatol Rapoport. Because this book focused on research, it could sometimes feel like the meat -- the practically applicable bits -- got lost in the theory, but it also meant there was a level of precision that you don't usually see in books about human relationships.

Overall, this book was a challenging read, but well worth the effort.

Sarah says

Relationships, explained by math!

Gottman uses game theory and various other fancy math things to explain how relationships succeed and fail. This book took me awhile to get through--it oscillated between so mathy I had to reread, and very intimate and feely. He mentions having done studies on same-sex relationships as well, and cited them in the book when the findings correlated with mixed-sex couples, but this book is decidedly heteronormative.

Overall, useful book with tons of interesting data.

Big takeaways:

You can tell a lot about the health of a relationship by how you/your partners respond to bids for attention and affection.

Preemptively addressing your partner's emotional state can lead to opportunities to build trust--he emphasizes that responding appropriately to these "sliding door" moments are crucial for long term relationship health, because each one is an opportunity to build emotional resonance and trust.

There's some sex-specific data about conflict resolution, but all members of a partnership show the same hallmarks of positive and negative relationships--positive ones are characterized by shared humor, a "we-" oriented story, and lots of tenderness and kindness during conflict. Negative ones show a lot of fundamental attribution error (where you forgive yourself for making mistakes, but attribute other people's mistakes to fundamental weaknesses of character--you're a cautious driver who sometimes makes mistakes, but the person who merged into you is a selfish, lazy jerk who can't drive, etc.), a "me-" centered story, rather than a "we-" centered one, and explosive, accusatory, or dismissive conflict.

Gottman identifies the "four horsemen" of relationships as stonewalling, criticism, defensiveness, and contempt. If you're getting any of these from your partner, or using them, it's a really bad sign.

Joy Matteson says

I truly enjoyed Dr. Gottman's book on emotional attunement and trust for building a marriage. Although his book is heavy on statistical data and technicalities, his book was still very practical for those who need specific ideas for how to build a marriage a word at a time. I found myself thinking as I was reading that those men who are more intellectual/cerebral in nature might enjoy this kind of 'self-help' marriage book, because let's be honest--they might not read any other kind than one that has graphs and theories! This is also a great read for any marriage therapist.

Lindsey Kay says

If you're looking for a book that very clearly explains the science behind why and how people trust, and how that can be used to create a healthy intimate relationship with a longtime partner or spouse, this is the book for you. Granted it is written by someone who is primarily a research scientist, and it's full of things like research terminology and mathematical graphs. If you can work your way through the trickier chapters (like the one on game theory) and stick it out for the practical advice at the end, it is well worth the read.

Dr. Lloyd E. Campbell says

If you think of his research like a deck of cards, he reshuffled the deck and came to some new conclusions. Original and thought provoking.

Judy Schmidt says

Loved it. A how-to for me in learning how to trust after growing up in a non-trusting environment. It explained a lot to me.

Brennan says

This was a very interesting book. It builds on Gottman's 20 years of research on what makes marriages work and fail by adding a new component of trust and attunement. I found it incredibly interesting and insightful.

The book is long and the ventures in game theory and lengthy discussions of trust metrics and his research methods were less interesting. And it is not really for general audiences - it is written more for couples therapists and academics. Chapters 1, 4, and 6 were the highlights.

Overall the book gave me a lot of new information for my teaching and for my clinical practice so it was definitely worth it.

Tesa Fiona says

My rating doesn't reflect the quality of the book. I go with Goodreads rating system, which 2 stars means that "it was ok" *based on my reading experience*.

I appreciate this book, and I usually appreciate research-based books. It's good that you read a very important topic in the light of science, where all the claims were tested, not merely just a postulate. What I am trying to say is, I usually enjoy these types of books, say Thinking, Fast and Slow, Daring Greatly, Me, Myself, and Why, and so on. But not this time. See, this book was written **mainly** not as an education to common people, I think the target was the therapists, counselors and researchers of the same field. It dig too deep into the history, research methodology, even the mathematics so I kind of overwhelmed by it. I feel like reading a literature back in the college.

I do get some important insights though, mainly on the 1st, 2nd and 6th chapter, but overall, I can't say that I do enjoy it.

It's not the book, I believe it is great. I'm just not the targeted audience.

Nick Blasier says

Very interesting all around - took a bunch of things I'm more comfortable with like game theory, math, and scientific observation, and did its best to "understand" emotions and relationships this way. At the same time, it stayed true to the sort of necessary lack of logic that exists in the realm of feelings - I was suspicious at first of how sciency it was, but the book manages to walk the line perfectly between the reality of emotions, and how much we can do to step out of them and understand interaction theoretically. The end effect was sort of a combination of the feel-good books I've read and more technical reading I do - it always really "rang true" with my experience, while remaining trustworthy in its assertions by backing them up.

It seemed more about the subtitle to me, and less about the title. "Trust" seemed to end up being a way to describe couples who were emotionally attuned. Staying in tune with one another gradually builds "trust", good will, good vibes, whatever, that tends to grow with time. On the flip side is missing these opportunities, and degrading into negativity. Probably the biggest takeaway: our attitudes feed off themselves. General positive or negative feelings about a partner or a relationship create more of the same in yourself, as well as your partner, generally feeding us eventually into really happy places or really sad ones.

Lela Brown says

Accessibly written to people outside the field, Gottman has observed human relationships for decades. This book is about romantic relationships and all kinds, lots of hints at how to not screw up little kids emotionally.

Sean Conner says

Top 5 books I've ever read. I credit John M. Gottman with giving me the courage to get married, and this book with keeping it on an upward trajectory. Thank you Mr. Gottman.

Jennifer says

This book is not for everyone. Some chapters are incredibly helpful and pretty easy to understand, and some chapters spend a lot of time justifying the research and explaining the math behind his research. I found the game theory chapters really interesting- but I was sometimes impatient because I was eager to jump into the meat-and-potatoes of relationship advice. So if you're going into this, just know that you need to maintain a meta perspective about the whole endeavor. This book feels more oriented to therapists than the average reader, but that appeals to me. In fact, this book appealed to my science-oriented, computer programmer husband much more than other similar books probably would have.

I found Gottman's insights to be helpful and interesting. But I do think that sometimes he explains his research without decoding for the reader how exactly that would translate into therapy or couple interaction. I wished he would make the connections a little more thoroughly, rather than just explaining the results and leaving them to stand on their own.

Overall, I think this book gives an important research-backed perspective on relationships and what makes them work- and how we can improve all the relationships in our lives. I especially recommend it for couples who approach relationship books with a lot of skepticism.

Paul says

The beginning date is an absolute guess. It took me far too long to finish this book. Obviously I read it precisely BECAUSE the subject matter is so troubling to me...not that this is an intrinsically troubling book. It's quite a fascinating read that seems unintentionally to bring in quite a few insights from varied branches of psychology and game theory; you won't come away having only learned about marital/romantic relationships.

The book is repetitive both intrinsically and with Gottman's Seven Principles book (and no doubt the rest of his corpus). As a planetary scientist, I recognize this as inevitable. Far too many people have far too many ideas and there is not enough data for all these opinions to chase...hmmm, that sounds familiar. It also reads a bit like Karl Popper, who spends so much of his space elaborating answers to critics. You can consequently, I should think, read most chapters in isolation. Then there's that last chapter, which I just finished reading and which I think is far too short...probably his editor told him, "No one will read this part, so cut 3/4 of it," and now the few people who would love to follow the solutions to these differential equations with him are stuck with this spotty and confusing outline.

Gottman's interpretations of his data will be challenged and revised as the years go by, but this is a valuable book because up to this point any attempt to offer marriage advice based on actual quantitative data, intelligently collected and analyzed, is so rare.

It also follows that this book is not for everyone. You will likely want to consider Gottman's Seven Principles or one of his other books before starting on this one. If you're not really intellectually curious about psychology and want to maximize your return on reading time invested in regards to your specific relationship, you will do better with one of the others.

stinaz says

At first I thought this was going to be just an update of the 7 principles. But it wasn't. It was about building the foundation for the 7 principles - the trust (of knowing the other person is going to be there for you) that underpins them. It was quite scientific (as far as social science goes). Not necessary to the advice itself, but good to see its backing.

In summary, trust is the positive answer to the question "are you going to be there for me?" Then conversely what untrustworthiness and betrayal is and how it is caused. And ending with how to build trust, and come back from untrustworthiness and betrayal. Here it did in fact use similar advice as the 7 principles - building trust by "attuning" to your partner, avoiding untrustworthiness by turning towards your partner and repairing conflicts, and avoiding betrayal by not allowing the untrustworthiness seed to grow. And the key point in working it all out, committing to doing so, the both of you.

Insightful, helpful, and a good follow up read from the 7 principles.

