

# When You're the One Who Wants to Try

*How one person can begin to change a marriage, even when their partner isn't there yet.*

FROM COUPLES CONVERSATIONS

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Not every marriage that needs attention looks the same.

Daniel and Maya\* have been married eleven years. Nothing is wrong, exactly. They are decent to each other, they run the house, they raise the kids. But somewhere along the way they became two people who share a calendar and not much else. Maya feels the distance and aches over it. Daniel, if you asked him, would say things are fine. They are living side by side, in parallel, and only one of them is unsettled by it.

Rachel and Tom\* are in very different places about growth itself. Rachel reads the books, listens to the podcasts, and would sit with a counselor tomorrow. Tom cares about her, but that world is not his. He hears each new suggestion as a verdict that he is the one who is broken, so he digs in. The more she reaches for tools, the further he backs away from them.

Then there are Sophia and André\*. When they try to have a difficult conversation, it tends not to go well. There are issues brewing in the background, but Sophia is more inclined to keep them bottled up inside. It is her way of keeping the peace. While she does not really have what she wants, she tells herself it is not so bad, because at least they are not fighting. André, meanwhile, is completely unaware. From where he sits, the calm is a perfect indicator that the relationship is strong.

Three different couples, three different stories. What they share is this. One person is ready to work on the marriage, and the other, for now, is not. That is a lonely place to stand. The harder you push, the more resistance you get, until the frustration quietly turns into something closer to despair. You start to wonder whether anything can change when you are the only one trying.

These couples are not broken. They are stuck. And being stuck is not the end of the road.

Most marriage advice is built for the couple who shows up together. Two partners who will talk honestly, sit with a counselor, and look for ways to make things better can accomplish a great deal, and there is no shortage of help for them. There has been almost nothing for the person who wants to begin alone. That is exactly the gap the research that follows fills.

## What the research actually shows

Dr. John Gottman, the world's leading researcher on relationships, has studied thousands of couples in his lab and can predict, with unsettling accuracy, which marriages will last and which will come apart. Almost everything he has given us assumes two people in the room. Two people turning toward each other, repairing after a fight, keeping a friendship alive over the years. It is the gold standard for the couple who shows up together.

But folded inside his own research is something just as powerful for the person standing alone.

Gottman found that long before a couple argues about anything on the surface, the overall story each partner carries about the other has already shaped how they will read it. When that story is warm, you give your partner the benefit of the doubt without trying. A forgotten errand is just a busy day. When the story has soured, that same forgotten errand becomes one more piece of evidence that they do not care. Same event, opposite meaning. What changed is the story you were reading it through. This is a powerful revelation, because it begins to show that the views and feelings each person holds individually within the relationship directly shape its overall health and satisfaction.

Looking back at our three couples above, one common thread they all share is that they hold views inside themselves and struggle with how to present or communicate them to their partner.

Here is what changes everything for someone in your position. You cannot reach into your partner and rewire how they see you. However, it is important to note that the meaning you assign to what they do is completely yours to shape. This is not living under a rock or in total denial. It is not faking it or forcing a smile when you are hurt. Rather, it is intentionally choosing to see the good, assume positive intent, and give the benefit of the doubt whenever possible. Although it might be easier said than done, the act of developing the muscle to skew toward the positive in your relationship and see the good in your partner will ultimately show up in practical benefits to the relationship.

Consider the following scenario. Imagine a couple wrapping up their day. The husband turns to his wife and says, "If you have a few minutes, I just want to chat with you before bed." Several minutes later, as he climbs into bed, he turns and notices she is already fast asleep. Consider the two possible paths below. Each one leads to a different outcome, but neither involves communication, only internal thought.

### Option A

#### WHAT YOU THINK

"I can't believe she did that. She knew I wanted to talk."

#### THE NEXT MORNING

She says, "Good morning." You say, "Don't good morning me." She asks why you're upset. You tell her she fell asleep, that you were supposed to talk. It isn't even eight o'clock and you are already in a fight.

### Option B

#### WHAT YOU THINK

You look at her and steer your mind somewhere truer and kinder. "She is wiped out. She worked so hard today. Look how peaceful she is. She didn't do this on purpose. I hope she sleeps well."

#### THE NEXT MORNING

She says, "Good morning." You smile. "Morning. How'd you sleep? You know you still owe me a conversation." She laughs. "Oh no, I fell asleep on you, I'm sorry. Let me put on some coffee and we'll sit down." Two minutes, and you are closer than you were yesterday.

Same night. Same sleeping spouse. The only thing that changed was the thought you reached for, and that one thought set everything after it in motion. The look on your face in the morning. The tone in your voice. The way she answered it. Whether the day opened with a wall or a door. That is not a trick of attitude. It is the quiet machinery running underneath the whole marriage, and it is yours to work, on your own.

## How to transform this seed into a lasting practice

While having a win here and there is helpful, it does not necessarily translate into lasting connection.

Dr. Sara Algoe, a psychologist at the University of North Carolina, has spent more than a decade on a deceptively simple question. What actually pulls two people closer? Her research keeps landing in the same place. Appreciation. The genuine act of noticing the good in the person you are with, and letting it land, first in you and then between you.

She calls the process find, remind, and bind. In a marriage you are already in, the part that matters most is the reminding and the binding. Appreciation reminds you why you chose this person, the parts the daily grind buries. And it binds the two of you closer, because being truly seen is something almost no one can resist for long. Here is what matters most if you are the only one reading this. It works even when only one person starts.

Consider a couple who feel too far gone to bother. A small kindness can seem like offering two drops of water to someone dying of thirst. Pointless. But that is not how a marriage works. Each small thing you do, one warm word, one look that lingers a second longer, does more than it appears to. It changes the

chemistry between you. It creates a slightly different version of the two of you, one a little more able to take the next step. The research is clear that it takes surprisingly little. A small, specific word of appreciation beats none, every time.

Put Gottman and Algoe next to each other and they point at the same truth from two directions. **Change what you notice and the story you tell yourself, and you change the marriage.**

## The Missing Piece

With this groundbreaking research uncovering a new opportunity for individuals to strengthen their relationship without requiring the involvement of their partner, it begs the question of how to do it. That is where Start With You can help.

### Start With You: What is it?

Start With You is the newest book from Couples Conversations, designed specifically for the individual partner who is ready before their spouse to improve their relationship. This unique guide includes ninety days of consecutive prompts combined with research-informed practice, communication tips, and relationship guidance designed specifically for you. It teaches the reader how to engage in a four-part daily practice that aims to transform the relationship starting with one person. It also includes a primer of key vocabulary to strengthen how you see your partner and communicate more effectively.

There is no confrontation in it. No difficult conversation you have to engineer. No waiting for your spouse to agree to anything. Just small, doable shifts that the research says move a marriage, done quietly by you. Often the air in the house changes before a word has been said about any of it. That is the whole point. You stop trying to drag the relationship forward, and you start leading it, gently, from the inside.

You do not need the book to begin tonight. The six questions below are a small sample of the daily prompts inside Start With You, enough to begin shifting how you see your marriage this evening.

## Six Questions to Begin Tonight

Your thinking is more like a muscle than a fixed trait, and these questions are a gentle way to start using it. They are a sample of the daily prompts in the full book. Sit with whichever ones reach you and write for a few minutes. There are no right answers, and no one else needs to see what you write.

1. Think back to the beginning. What first drew you to your partner? Write down one moment you still smile about.

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2. What is one thing, however small, that your partner still does that makes your day a little easier?

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3. When did you last feel close, even for a moment? What was happening around you, and what did it feel like in your body?

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4. Picture your marriage a year from now, a little warmer than it is today. What is one small thing that looks different?

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5. What is one thing you appreciate about your partner that you have not said out loud in a while?

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6. Think of a tender moment when you felt close to your partner. Close your eyes and return to it. What do you notice in your body? See if you can name the specific sensations that carry the feeling. The warmth. The ease. The relief of being with the person you chose.

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### Ready for the full practice?

Start With You turns the research above into a four-part practice you move through over ninety days, a few minutes each evening, on your own. The six questions you just tried are a small taste of what is inside.

**Get the full book at [couples-conversations.com/StartWithYou](https://couples-conversations.com/StartWithYou)**

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*A note on this guide: this is educational content from Couples Conversations, written to encourage and support you. It is not therapy, a clinical assessment, or advice for your specific situation. It is written for relationships moving through the ordinary strain and distance of a busy life. If you are experiencing abuse, or you ever feel unsafe with your partner, this guide is not the right resource for that, and reaching out to someone you trust or a support service you choose is the more important next step. The couples described in this guide are composites created for illustration, not real clients.*