

# The Dinosaur Legacy

## Why We Fight Poorly

*War is the unfolding of miscalculations.*

*Barbara Tuchman, The Guns of August (1962)*

Couples fight. It's been that way for as long as humankind has been on earth. Some couples fight and make up, fight and make up, and still have healthy, stable relationships. No harm, no foul. For other couples, the fighting causes such deep and abiding psychic pain that they've got no choice but to uncouple themselves. Still others remain in tension-filled, angry, and distant relationships with little access to affection or comfort.

Here's what most people don't understand: fighting is natural. Fighting is also quite normal. It comes from the deepest, most primitive, most "reptilian" part of our brains, and, as we shall see throughout this book, this oldest remnant of our evolutionary development can undermine the most reasonable, "human" parts of ourselves to cause horrific damage and destruction.

The upside of this is that once we understand where the fighting instinct originates and just why it is that we fight so poorly, we can do something about it. We can stop being petty, mean, and cruel to those we care about. We can stop interpreting our partner's words and gestures as personal affronts. We can evolve from irrational, hurtful combatants and form healthy and satisfying relationships.



## REPTILES IN LOVE

### Ozzie and Harriet Don't Live Here Anymore

Peter and Janet have been married for eight years. They have two children, good jobs, and many common interests. Their friends see them as “the perfect couple.” Behind closed doors, however, the story is quite different. They often find themselves in the middle of the most ridiculous arguments, unable to stop before hurting each other.

They argue over the usual big three—money, kids, and sex—but they also argue over whether one of them shut a cabinet door extra hard or was sufficiently careful with the groceries. They fight bitterly over television shows and whether one of them goes to sleep too late at night. They circle and stalk each other like guerrilla fighters, waiting for the next insult or attack. An outsider would note the critical, angry jabs that each delivers and the genuine surprise of the attacker when he or she is counterattacked or abandoned. The couple hide this from their friends and family, and only their closest confidants know that they are having any trouble.

They tell themselves they're keeping this animosity a secret from their kids, but we all know that's impossible. Children pick up emotional storm warnings with an accuracy that would put any Doppler system to shame. Peter and Janet slowly begin to realize that their children have been demonstrating significant symptoms of stress all along (sleep problems, stomachaches, temper tantrums, and increased difficulties at school).

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By the time Peter and Janet decided to seek help, Janet was threatening divorce. It's not a huge revelation that we often treat those closest to us as though they were our enemies. It's incredibly painful to realize that someone you love—and who you thought loved you—can suddenly call you the worst names, insult you or your family, ignore your needs, or even physically harm you. We enter relationships with excitement, physical arousal, and romantic views of our lover's perfection and unique love for us. Inevitably, we feel betrayed. That's just the way it is. It's impossible to sustain an unrealistic attraction to each other, one based on the concept of an idealized, romantic, uplifting, and beautifully perfect union.

Actually, this is the good news. We are not robots, nor are we angels. We possess faults, sins, and odd beliefs, all of which make us interesting to one another. The bad news is that the very traits we often initially identify as most attractive in our partners, or that seem critical to the partnership, can also become the traits we most vehemently resent.

When Peter and Janet met, they were both a couple of years out of painful breakups with prior lovers. They were amazed at the instant connectedness they felt toward one another. Peter was working two jobs at the time and was struggling to recoup from huge debts he had incurred trying to keep his former lover happy. He had organized his spending carefully and was advancing professionally to where he was finally able to give up his night job. Janet was a free spirit. Her previous relationship was with an angry, controlling, and at times physically abusive man, and she was determined that no one would ever again bring her down like that. She wanted to have a good time and feel young again. Peter couldn't believe that such a beautiful, talented, funny, and vivacious woman could love him, but love him she did. Janet saw Peter as not only an attractive man who knew how to work hard and treat her well but also as a sort of anchor when she felt she was moving too fast. She felt safe with him. He helped her with some credit card problems she had developed, and she helped him learn to enjoy life a little.

By the time they came to see me, Peter had taken to calling Janet an “airhead.” When Janet referred to her hard-working hubby, she had been heard to mutter “tight-ass” under her breath. Both felt hurt and betrayed by the fact that what their partner had once seen as essential and admirable elements of their characters were suddenly being viewed as fatal flaws.

What makes us resort to the most primitive, aggressive behavior against the same individuals whom we once cherished? What moves us to launch an attack on the once treasured qualities of the person to whom we have most intimately bound ourselves?

## **THE FIGHT-OR-FLIGHT RESPONSE: INTRODUCING THE REPTILIAN BRAIN**

If you want to understand why (and how) you fight the one you love, you need to understand that it’s only natural—if you look at it from a physical perspective. When you get into an argument with someone, you immediately—and unconsciously—tap into primitive bodily functions. Biological reactions to pain and stress create the foundation of most negative human interactions, even those occurring between lovers. When you understand this concept, you can understand any couple’s mutually self-destructive, even sadistic behavior.

Our bodies are equipped with an instinctual reflexive system called the *fight-or-flight response*,<sup>1</sup> which is designed to protect us from harm. When we sense that we’re being threatened, our bodies engage this powerful response system instantly, aimed toward one thing and one thing only—survival. We have only one immediate imperative: fight or run away.

Our entire body is affected, including physical and mental functioning. We experience shallow breathing, increased heart rate, change in blood flow, tightening of muscles (preparation to spring into action), heightened adrenaline production, and increased

activity of neurotransmitters.<sup>2</sup> So complex and arousing is this state that one might say that we are actually most alive, physiologically speaking, when we're in a state of danger.

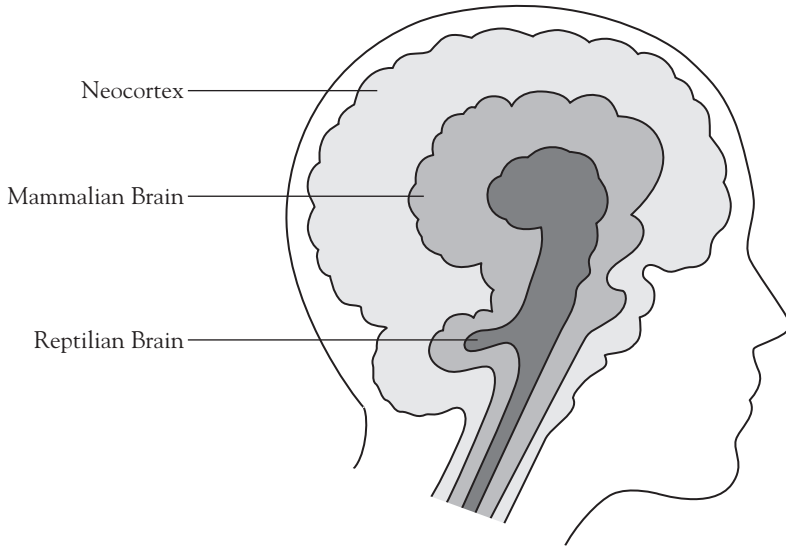
As all these physiological changes take place, what are we thinking?

Not much.

## The Reptilian Response

As the body prepares for combat or to flee from a threat, the brain is making adjustments for the most efficient response by narrowing its focus and demands. A primitive portion of the brain, the *Reptilian Brain*, takes over primary responsibilities. The Reptilian Brain controls much of what we see as physical needs: breath, heart rate, muscle tension, physical aspects of sexual response, and self-protection through the aforementioned fight-or-flight response. The Reptilian Brain responds instinctually to the environment, enabling us to operate at about the same basic level as does a reptile. A reptile primarily eats, sleeps, fights, flees, and has sex. It can respond rapidly to protect itself from danger, but it does not have access to higher levels of cognitive functioning. When we're in a state of high stress or danger, our Reptilian Brain becomes our command center; it is concerned only with the immediate threat (real or perceived) to our safety and survival. We lose creativity, organizational skills, empathy, concentration, and ability to learn new information in direct proportion to the intensity of the stress.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of the fight-or-flight response holds that when threatened, any creature has two main options: (1) to fight back, attacking with the full intention of rendering the attacker harmless through injury or death, or (2) to attempt to run away or remain still, hoping the danger will pass by. All responses to threat fall into these two categories. Check the lists here to see if you recognize your favorite *modus operandi* during conflict. (You will notice that you might use fight and flight tactics simultaneously, such as attacking your partner and then trying to get away.)



*Flight*

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- Pretending you don't hear negative comments being made by your partner
- Leaving whenever conflict appears to be developing
- Avoiding bringing up any of your own concerns, because "it will just start something"
- Terminating any discussion that becomes uncomfortable by leaving or by saying, "I won't talk about this anymore!"
- Agreeing with your partner simply to be left alone

*Fight*

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- Calling your partner names
- Threatening your partner with divorce, harm, property damage

- Using sarcasm
- Yelling or moving in a threatening, intimidating fashion
- Bringing up old behaviors as a way of driving home your point
- Physically abusing your partner, anything from pushing and shoving to serious violence
- Needing to win at all cost

## **The Reptile in the Modern World**

You might think that as evolved human beings, we no longer need this primitive response system. However, the fight-or-flight response and the Reptilian Brain from which it comes are truly miraculous. If you're in a situation of physical threat, such as a potential car accident, you desperately need this system to work as it does.

Picture this: You're driving down the street in your neighborhood. You feel safe and comfortable because you know this area well. You are on the main straightaway, and you're almost home. Suddenly a car approaches from a side street. There is a stop sign that the other driver has apparently ignored. You barely have time to brake, turn your wheel, and avoid the collision.

In an instant, your fight-or-flight response took over and responded in rote mechanical ways that you, as an experienced driver, know well. What would have happened if this process had misfired and your higher-level brain had taken over? What if you had suddenly focused on trying to figure out exactly how hard you needed to hit the brake or how far to turn the wheel? What would have been your fate if you had become preoccupied with thoughts about why the other driver did such a stupid, reckless thing? You would have been injured or killed. Mercifully this does not happen. The Reptilian Brain takes over as a protective device without your needing to think about it. For a moment in time, perhaps nanoseconds,

you don't care about anything intellectual—beauty, art, music, or philosophy. You don't care about what you plan to do when you get home. You don't care about the other driver, including whether he lives or dies. Your body's immediate self-protective reaction takes over and is nearly perfect. The Reptilian Brain has done its job.<sup>4</sup>

What happens, though, when another form of threat, such as a marital disagreement, arouses this same physical response?

## THREAT AND DANGER IN A RELATIONSHIP: IT'S ALL IN HOW YOU SEE IT

*In a very strict monastery, only one monk is allowed to speak on the first day of each month. Each is given a turn. On one occasion, the monk chosen for the part announced, "I don't like the mashed potatoes here. They're lumpy and tasteless." On the following month, another monk announced, "I like the mashed potatoes here. They always seem well-prepared and fresh." A month later, the third monk stood and proclaimed, "I'm leaving the monastery. I can't stand all this bickering."*

Does arguing with your spouse really pose a threat to your life? After all, most people don't physically harm each other. So why does the Reptilian Brain kick in during a disagreement about who needs to take out the garbage? Each of us discerns the degree of threat based on a wide variety of inputs, including our current health, our level of stress, recent events, family history, culture, and many other issues. To understand the threats to a relationship, we must examine the various layers of the partners' interactions. You will see that in stressful situations, we tend to think oversimplistically and to reduce complex issues to the lowest common denominator.

Under severe threat, the Reptilian Brain overrides the higher-order mammalian and neocortical brains (which allow us to make more thoughtful decisions) and pushes us around in the “thoughtless” manner described earlier. In our relationships, we of course hope for higher-order thinking of the neocortical variety to help us make smart decisions and use logical problem-solving skills. Unfortunately, the Reptilian Brain often gets in the way.

Intimate human interaction is a complex beast indeed; however, the Reptilian Brain makes only the simplest choices. The Reptilian Brain doesn’t organize data. Abstract or complex reasoning is foreign to it. It is not creative, nor does it empathize. It’s not good at planning for the future, nor at predicting consequences. The Reptilian Brain decides merely, “Should I eat it, kill it, run away from it, or have sex with it?”

The chart here describes the thinking skills involved at the different levels of brain function,<sup>5</sup> using as an example possible responses to meeting someone for the first time:

<i>Thinking Skill</i>	<i>Response to New Acquaintance</i>
<i>New Brain (Neocortex)</i> —Understanding past experience and planning for the future, reasoning and science, abstract reasoning	Can I trust this person? This person seems attractive, but do I know enough about him or her? Are we similar enough in values, beliefs, and tastes to really have a good relationship?
<i>Mammalian Brain</i> —Pursuing affection, engaging in family and social ties, responding to sense of duty and responsibility	Will this person really care for and love me? Am I safe with him or her? This person seems smart and kind, and I’m sure I feel something here.
<i>Reptilian Brain</i> —Eating, sleeping, fighting, running away, mating	I really, really, really want to have sex with this person.

Physically, the Reptilian Brain is located very close to those parts of our brain that govern speech. Unfortunately, we can be quite verbal without being able to access our best thinking faculties. There is much wisdom in the slogan, “Caution: Please ensure that brain is engaged before opening mouth.”<sup>6</sup>

The fight-or-flight response evokes black-or-white thinking. The brain narrows its focus to survival necessities. Higher brain functioning, such as abstract reasoning—your ability to understand metaphors, representations, jokes, and other communications requiring interpretation—is diminished. A remark that once might have been shrugged off or seen as amusing is now experienced as a poison dart thrown right at your heart. You are more easily confused and therefore more easily threatened.

How often have you been in a battle where you and your partner could not stay on a single point? As you fought, you each used hurtful memories or episodes, no matter how vague or ancient, as a way of saying that your partner was wrong, stupid, offensive, or evil. You could not stay focused and maintain a reasonable discussion because the Reptilian Brain doesn’t have organizational skills. Have you ever referred to your partner, in the heat of battle, in a sarcastic, demeaning, or obscene way, one in which you would never address any other person, not even an enemy? At some level, you know that this will be hurtful and make your partner feel terrible. You know that the person you love should not be treated this way. Yet your Reptilian Brain cannot reason in this fashion. It cannot empathize or fully appreciate the likely results of combative behavior.

We often treat strangers better than we treat those closest to us. This isn’t because we like strangers better than our loved ones, nor because “familiarity breeds contempt.” It’s because we place the highest expectations on those closest to us, and consequently risk the greatest disappointments in such relationships. An intimate relationship is the safest, most rewarding place for us when it is good and the most dangerous place when it has soured. Strangers cannot harm us as deeply as those we truly care about. We have an imag-

ined agreement with our loved ones; we expect to be loved, admired, lusted after, and enjoyed, no matter how poorly we may behave. The discovery that no human being can always live up to these expectations creates a deep wound.

### **How Important Is Safety in Intimacy?**

In a verbal battle, the level of perceived threat relates to your relationship with the other combatant and to your immediate needs. Do you need this person to agree with you, do business with you, not feel superior to you, love and care for you? Does this person make you feel safe? In love relationships, safety is essential. Without a sense of safety, we're more likely to go into the reptilian mode and attack our loved one.<sup>7</sup> The threat is not necessarily one of physical harm (we'll discuss physical violence later), but to our sense of well-being and to our need to be okay, competent, powerful, and loved. When a loved one—probably the most influential person in your life—attacks you or somehow implies a lack of caring, love, or respect for you, you quickly perceive emotional threat and the need to protect yourself.



## **REPTILES IN LOVE**

### **The Frightened Monster**

Married for fifteen years, and now complaining that they have nothing in common, Tom and Anita are stuck. They argue about who spends money more foolishly and whose hobbies are the bigger waste of time. They complain that even when they have something very important to discuss, they never really solve anything. Tom complains that Anita won't stick with a discussion, and she states that the only way that he'll be satisfied is if she just gives in and agrees with him.

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## REPTILES IN LOVE

### The Frightened Monster

Tom is a large, muscular man with a deep, booming voice that is a little loud even in casual discussion. Anita is a petite woman who tends to look down at the floor when she's making her more assertive points. As they portray their interactions in exquisite detail, Anita insists that she often becomes afraid of Tom. When Tom hears this, he becomes red in the face and demands that Anita admit that he has "never touched her." During this discussion he has considerable difficulty sitting still. He leans forward, raises his voice, and finally says, "I've had it. Nothing I do is right, and you just keep running away. Maybe we should just get a divorce."

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Tom has no intention of harming Anita. He can't believe that she would think he could. Anita can't stand the tone and volume of his voice and the physical intimidation he displays when angry and frustrated. She describes him standing up in such arguments, stepping toward her, and overpowering whatever she says with his loud voice. Whenever it looks like a discussion is headed in this direction, she tries to get away from him. Her attempts at escape frustrate and threaten Tom. The more she flees, the more helpless and fearful he becomes. The more helpless he feels, the more reptilian his responses become. Shouting and intimidating has never gotten Anita to agree with him, but when he's most frightened, he's unable to see this. He comes across as a bully. She can't understand how he can treat her so poorly.

Tom and Anita have developed a perfect cycle of danger and frustration. Each accuses the other of not listening . . . and both are right. The Reptilian Brain cannot listen accurately; in order to hear each other and respond in a helpful way, they must be able to calm

themselves and slow things down. Their brains would then begin to work properly, and the higher-level functions would kick in. Instead, they both feel that they must solve the problem before they can calm down—but they can't solve *anything* until they can listen to each other. To listen to each other, they must first calm down. Thus, the cycle continues.

### ***Evolutionary Tip*** **Quick Release from** **Reptilian Responses**



Perhaps the most difficult challenge you face in working on your relationship is recognizing when the Reptilian Brain is about to strike, and cutting off your own physiological arousal before it overwhelms you. The earlier you intervene with the fight-or-flight response, the less damage will occur. Starting now, I suggest you take the following actions as you begin working on your relationship. This is a first step in reducing the destructive patterns in your difficult interactions. (The process will become clearer as you learn more about yourself and your relationship.)

1. *Monitor yourself for reptilian responses.* (These include racing heart, muscle tension, desire to escape, desire to defend yourself, desire to defeat your partner.)
2. *Take a deep “abdominal” breath or two.* (Inhale slowly through your nose, first inflating your abdomen (it looks like a beer belly but it works), then expand your chest and finally raise your shoulders in order to let the last bit of air into your lungs. Hold the breath briefly and exhale slowly through your mouth, reversing the process above, first

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### ***Evolutionary Tip*** **Quick Release from** **Reptilian Responses** *(continued)*



releasing your shoulders, deflating your chest, and finally feeling your abdomen release. Feel tension release as you exhale and then repeat.)

3. *Now ask yourself two questions:*
  - a. What is this discussion about?
  - b. What do I need right now?

\*As you progress through the book, you may wish to ask your partner what he or she sees as the goal of the discussion and what he or she needs right now.

4. If you feel that you are still negatively aroused and unable to have a good discussion, stop and *take a break for at least twenty minutes*. Leave the room, maybe even leave the house and go for a walk or run around the block. (You and your partner will eventually discover how long these breaks actually need to be, but it generally takes the body at least twenty minutes to recover from the fight-or-flight state.)

Whenever you feel your Reptilian Brain taking over (and as you read through the book, you'll recognize it more and more), practice this Quick Release from Reptilian Responses. I'll remind you about it at various points as we go on.

Can Anita feel safe? Tom has never physically harmed her and probably never will. But when her personal space is being invaded, such empirical data don't mean squat. Her Reptilian Brain takes over, and all she can focus on is getting out of the situation. Tom is hovering over her, yelling, wanting, and waiting. Why? And for what? As she sees it, she can gain relief only by physically leaving the room or by "surrendering" to Tom (which is a form of escape).

Does Tom feel safe? Anita has certainly never physically harmed him. Yet when she pulls away from him, he feels ignored, put down, unloved, and even treated as if he were dangerous or despicable. This from the person who used to claim she loved him! The only way he can get relief is to get her to sit still and hear him out. He will say, “She doesn’t have to agree with me, but for God’s sake, she could at least listen to me now and then.”

Lovers in battle are like gunslingers. Once a showdown has started and injuries have been inflicted, both partners have armed themselves. To move closer to one another, each must put down his or her weapons. Imagine if, in the Old West, two gunslingers faced off in the street and one of them said, “Hey, I’ll tell you what. I’ll just keep my gun aimed at your chest while you put yours down. After you’ve done that, I promise to put mine down as well.” The response, of course, would be something along the lines of “Bite me!” Once betrayed—by harsh words or inappropriate behavior—neither partner can feel safe. It’s just that simple. You don’t need to draw blood or leave a bruise to inflict an injury.

### **Opposites Attract—and Fight in Opposite Ways**

Tom and Anita, like many other couples, argue often. For them, it’s not the number of arguments that is the problem, it’s that they have such diametrically opposite fighting styles. Their family histories and traditions help us understand their differences.

Tom comes from a boisterous family of rowdies, in which the dinner table has all the calm and decorum of the bleachers at Wrigley Field. Disagreement and battle are a standing family tradition and are not seen as detracting at all from the family members’ affection for one another. For them, silence and retreat are actually signs of disdain.

Anita comes from a quiet, well-mannered family, one that keeps disagreements to a minimum and frowns on raised voices. Family members show care for one another through many acts of kindness, touching, and hugging, and they feel confused by arguments. They engage in earnest discussion of the issues and strive toward compromise, and they all appreciate the warmth of the home. It all feels

kind of nice to Tom, but sometimes a little creepy too. When things are good, he seems to enjoy Anita's family. When he's angry, he refers to them as the Cleavers, intoning the name as warmly as one might the Manson family.

As a young woman, Anita found her home safe but a little boring. She appreciated Tom's more lively behavior and "the way he laughed and carried on." Tom liked the quiet and thoughtful woman he found in Anita. She made him feel calmer. Now Anita sometimes feels completely overrun, if not threatened, by Tom, and Tom feels that she is avoiding and ignoring him. Both feel more and more hopeless about ever feeling respected by the other.

### ***Evolutionary Tip*** **Recognize Dangerous Partners**

#### **Warning!**

Although our goal is to help partners help each other slow down the patterns of the fight-or-flight response, the reality is that some partners are indeed dangerous. If your partner has used physical violence or threats of violence to you, your family, or your children; threats to take your children away; threats to have you arrested on imaginary charges; or threats of damage to your property, read no further. You absolutely must see to your safety before you can continue to work on your relationship. I will not continue in therapy with a couple who has experienced physical violence or threats of violence without a commitment by both that they will take all steps necessary to ensure their mutual safety. At worst, separation may be necessary, but in most cases we have been able to reach other agreements that allow the couple to stay together with a guarantee from both partners of no further physical contact or dangerous behavior when upset.



For any couple to come to cooperate and grow close, both parties must feel safe. A husband who has pushed or struck his wife might commit to avoiding any hint of threatening behavior, such as agreeing to remain seated throughout discussions in their home. If this becomes impossible, he will end the discussion and remove himself for a prescribed amount of time to calm down. In return, the wife may agree that at such times, she will not pursue him and try to “finish” the fight. Notice, please, that at the point where he’s feeling as though he can’t sit still and she can’t stop arguing, this is no longer a discussion or disagreement: it’s a *fight*. As long as they remain in the reptilian mode, the possibility that either of them will learn something new or reach a positive solution is nearly zero. Their agreement may also include that if one of them simply cannot control himself or herself, the other will call the police.

Confusing? I’m warning you to protect yourself. I’m also asking you to be open to change. We keep coming back to trust and honesty. If you can’t trust your partner not to seriously injure you, your family, your possessions, your reputation, or your well-being, then it’s impossible to work on improving your relationship. If you can gradually devise agreements that allow you to feel safe in the situation, then communication and increased intimacy stand a chance. It’s not all that confusing, is it?

The subject of safety is much broader than implied by the dramatic examples I’ve presented. Often when I initially describe safety issues with couples, they think that I mean exclusively physical safety, and therefore feel exempt because “Oh, we don’t have those problems.” But safety also means the freedom from feeling insulted, ignored, rejected, controlled, unloved, or in any other way diminished as a person. Safety includes freedom from feeling like a bad, stupid, or incompetent partner. My goal is to encourage you to provide that kind of safety to one another.

Working out safety issues requires a great deal of faith, trust, and sensitivity, which is probably already lacking when a couple is angry, volatile, or disconnected. Suppose I tell you that when you start

yelling, I'm afraid you'll hurt me. You (who don't have any intention of hurting me) may feel that I'm exaggerating or attempting to paint you in a bad light. So you try to convince me that I'm treating you unfairly. When you see that I'm still afraid, you become frustrated and start yelling at me. It doesn't really matter what you say next, because I disconnected the minute you started yelling.

If Tom can recognize that Anita becomes physically upset and is unable to focus when he gets loud or moves toward her, he can experiment with changing his behavior. He doesn't have to admit to being a bad or intimidating person. And Anita would do well not to use terminology that negatively categorizes Tom. Calling him a bully, a big jerk, or a loudmouthed blowhard could be taken the wrong way, after all.

Think about it another way. If Tom wore cologne, which he liked but that nauseated Anita, he would probably stop wearing that cologne. In the same way, if he could see that his in-your-face behavior, which seems perfectly reasonable to him, upsets Anita, he would stop "wearing" his aggression in her presence.

Tom and Anita might agree to have their most serious discussions at the dining room table. Tom will be less likely to advance on Anita with a table between them, and, although attack is still possible, Anita may just feel a little safer. They might agree on a "ten-foot rule" that requires them to maintain ten feet between them when discussing anything serious. If they really want to be playful, they can measure out a ten-foot length of rope and hold it taut between them. If the rope goes slack, they need to take a break in the discussion. I have even had a few large, overwhelming men sit on the floor while talking to their wives, who remain sitting in a chair. This changes the dynamics dramatically.

## The Greatest Fear of All

*An elderly woman is sitting in a rocking chair and petting her cat, when suddenly a fairy appears and proclaims, "You have led a good life, and I will grant you three wishes."*

*The woman says, "I want to be twenty-four years old and beautiful once again."*

*The fairy says, "Let it be," and sure enough the woman is transformed into a young beauty.*

*Next, the woman wishes for a million dollars, and immediately this is granted. Finally she says, "I wish my old cat here were a handsome young man who would fall deeply in love with me."*

*Poof. She finds herself in the arms of the best-looking guy she has ever seen in her life, and he is looking at her adoringly.*

*He kisses her gently and says, "I'll bet you wish you hadn't had me fixed."*

The one thing it seems everyone fears most in relationships is change. (As in the joke here, even the most seemingly alluring changes can disappoint or harm.) Why is change so frightening? What keeps couples from trying counseling or other interventions when they hit a bad patch? How can there be so much resistance when it seems clear that improving their relationship would have such immediate benefits?

The following are common fears most people face when attempting major changes in their relationships:

- Nothing will happen.
- Things will improve, but only for a short time, and then we'll go back to the same rut, back to doing the same old things that hurt so much before, but we'll feel worse.
- Things will get better, but it won't be enough. My partner will try to please me, and I still won't be happy; (or) I'll work hard and make myself vulnerable,

and it won't be enough. Either way, I'll really feel like a jerk.

- I'll be asked to do things that won't be good for me or that I can't do.
- Things could get worse. Right now our relationship may not be great, but it's okay, and if we muck around with it, who knows what might happen?

Recognizing and discussing these perfectly normal fears may speed you along to some of the most pressing matters in your relationship. Kept as secrets, they can be fatal to the change process and to the relationship.

Obviously there's risk in any change, and any request for change is stressful at some level. The request suggests that something is wrong, which is stressful in its own right. But what if your request is for something your partner doesn't really believe he or she can do? The partner's answer might be, "I don't need to change. There's nothing wrong with a drink or two (or twenty) in the evening." But the truth the partner holds back may be, "I don't think I can do this. How am I supposed to give up alcohol when I feel so awful?" Other examples include requests that a quiet person talk more or be more outgoing, that a sloppy person be neater, that an angry person stop being so angry, that a person upset with the partner's family treat them better—and the list goes on. Acknowledging the partner's fear that he or she can't make a change allows the couple to back up and look at what part of the request is negotiable or how the change can be made more manageable.

The thread throughout these fears is the hopelessness that one or both partners experience with one another and the sense that, through the change process, they will be made to feel even worse than they already do. These fears must be respected and addressed. When one partner's reptilian response to a request for change is

“Get off my back! Why are you always nagging me? Did you learn about marriage in a concentration camp?” what he might really mean is “I’m afraid to try to change. What if I can’t do it? I’m afraid that if I can’t change, you’ll leave me.” This can be an extremely painful admission, but it can also be tremendously freeing once acknowledged.

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Now that you’ve been introduced to the Reptilian Brain, you should have a clearer understanding of why you fight with people you love. In the next chapter, we’ll take a closer look at some of the things we actually fight about and the “stupid” ways we go about it.

