Talk to Me Like
I’m Someone
You Love

Relationship Repair in a Flash
How to Use This Book

Before using these Flash Cards for Real Life in the trenches, it’s a good idea to read through them all. Some may evoke a pang of recognition or appreciation (“Boy, that would have been handy last week when . . .”). In most relationships, what would have been handy a week ago will almost certainly be useful tomorrow. Some of the messages will be thoughts that you may have never thought to share before. Some will feel more “you” than others. Just allow yourself to take in this universe of repair possibilities. On the page opposite each ready-to-flash message, I have included some field notes on the particular message and some suggestions as to when its use might be optimal. Just by reading the flash cards and field notes, you are majorly expanding your response repertoire.

The messages in this book are divided into nine categories to assist you in finding the right tone and optimal words for whatever uncomfortable or painful encounter you happen to find yourselves in: I. Shifting Gears, II. Setting Limits, III. Feeling Vulnerable, IV. Taking Responsibility, V. Apologizing, VI. Giving Information, VII. Getting Clarification, VIII. Loving and IX. Making Up. Imagine you are stuck in a combative stance and are somewhat motivated to move in a kinder direction. (I say “somewhat” because that’s usually the case initially; the messages are designed to move you toward wholeheartedness.) If you do not have a pre-designated message to go to, scan the list of categories in the table of contents and let yourself gravitate toward the section that seems to match your current emotional climate. Feeling intimidated by your partner might lead you to Setting Limits; feeling exposed and defensive might lead you to Feeling Vulnerable and feeling confused and worried about what your partner seems to be suggesting might make Getting Clarification a good place to start. And so on. Please keep in mind that the indexing is under-
standably subjective, and the “perfect message” may turn out to be not what you’d initially suspect.

If truth be told, the indexing of the statements was the most challenging aspect of conceptualizing Talk to Me Like I’m Someone You Love. It’s not just that the interpretation of the messages is fairly subjective—it’s that even objectively speaking, each message could be reasonably placed in several of the categories.

For instance, the flash card “I can see that my anger has been destructive and that I’ve really hurt you” was placed in section IV, Taking Responsibility. And this makes sense; the Sender would be taking responsibility for his or her impact on the Receiver. But at the same time, a case could be made for putting this message in the Feeling Vulnerable section, since when we take ownership of our own stuff it absolutely puts us in a vulnerable position. We have no idea whether our vulnerability will be received compassionately or will be an opportunity for our partner to really let us know how much we’ve hurt them. There is an implicit “I’m sorry” embedded in “I can see that my anger has been destructive . . .” and for similar reasons, another case could be made for placing the exact same flash card in the Apologizing section.

Furthermore, virtually any message in the entire book could fall under the heading Feeling Vulnerable, because the very act of leaving the combat zone and indicating “I’m putting down arms and showing you how much I’d rather be closer to you” is an act of exceptional vulnerability in itself, and of potential rejection if not well received. Likewise, the very act of offering a flash card is a move toward Shifting Gears and frequently one in the direction of Making Up, given that your partner will almost always be quite appreciative that one of you had the gumption to redirect things in a more humane manner. Similarly, almost any message is a
form of *Giving Information* of an interpersonal, if not intimate, nature. And bringing things full circle, the very act of proffering the flash card is a *Loving* act, even if the specific language isn’t particularly affectionate. “I hate feeling I have to walk on eggshells around you,” from the *Setting Limits* section, isn’t what you’d find on your average Hallmark card, but the mere act of quietly sharing this sentiment with your partner totally carries the powerful meta-message: ”I want to feel safe with you”—and embedded in that message is yet another unspoken message: “It’s scary getting close to you when I don’t feel safe . . . and how I wish I were feeling closer to you.” Most people would be very happy to get a Hallmark card from a loved one that said that. And they’d probably melt getting it.

All this being said, there actually is some comprehensible structure to the ordering of the flash cards, and my guess is that reading them, you’ll get a feel for the logic that caused me to place a card in one section and not in another. I am taking the time, though, to acknowledge the idiosyncratic and un-pin-downable aspect of all this, so that you, the user, will not get hung up on using or not using a message because, say, you are on the road to *Apologizing* and the message that draws you happens to be in some other section. Or because your particular situation defies both my partial vision of things and the unique ways you and your beloved are hardwired.

While offering a message is usually more important than perfecting it, some moments do call for original messages. One woman reported turning a miserable interaction around when she wrote to her husband: *I don’t really hate you. I got so mad when you told me I had to cancel the party because planning the party felt like an act of devotion toward you.* Creating your own message can be a beautiful way to honor yourself, your relationship and your commitment to sanity. To this end, a number of blank pages are provided at the end of this book.
Over the years, as I have presented the concept of Flash Cards for Real Life, people sometimes question me on the user-friendliness of the whole idea. Typically I get, "How am I supposed to go look up a message and use it when I am triggered? It feels klunky . . . and it takes time!" Toward this end, I spent years contemplating how the indexing and mobility of the set could be maximally functional. But recently I have rethought this. If the Magic Communication Elf instantly put the perfect message in your hands, believe me, something would be lost. The point isn’t to just calm your partner . . . it is to create a lucid interval in which you consciously shift gears and choose to be in your right mind over your reactive one. You should be part of making this happen and it should take a little time and effort on your part.

Rarely do you leave Starbucks or the ATM machine because two people unfortunately happen to be in line in front of you. No, you wait for your latte or for your money. If you know where the set is (not an insignificant point, and the reason why in a perfect world you should each have your own set), finding a relevant message takes far less time than the order and delivery of your latte. This is your relationship, for goodness’ sake, and it should be worth the effort!

So here’s the truth: it is less important that this gift in your hands be "user-friendly" than that "the user be friendly."

The other question I’ve heard a lot is: "What should I do if my partner is not open to using these flash cards?" It may be that one person will be enthusiastic about trying the
repair messages in this book and the other will prefer to just make skeptical—even underminder—comments like “It’s too contrived” or “dumb” or “We communicate so well, why would you ever think we need something like this?” I suggest that, when the occasion arises, the more willing partner simply offer a conciliatory message (for example, “I can see that I’ve missed the point. Please give me another chance”). Then, without fanfare, both of you can note the results. Your partner will likely be more open to these Flash Cards for Real Life once they’ve sampled their healing power.

I would add that some initial self-consciousness in using this guidebook to intimacy is not unusual. Any intimate gesture can be thwarted by anticipated awkwardness. The spirit of Talk to Me Like I’m Someone You Love is the willingness to do something that might feel a drop uncomfortable for the sake of mutual healing. Willingness itself is a loving thing. And the more the message reflects your truth, the more comfortable you are going to be with it.

Finally, I encourage you to experiment, in particular, with the title message of the set “Talk to me like I’m someone you love.” It is an extremely healing statement and you’ll hear more about it in the field notes on page 71. Consider, too, that in the midst of any real power struggle, the willingness to offer any heartfelt message implies “Come on, let’s talk to each other like we really love each other.” The messages only work because they tap into what we’ve been groping for all along—a shared awareness that the bond between us is so much more fundamental than our differences.

I hope that using Talk to Me Like I’m Someone You Love inspires you to forever trust your own insides to heal any relationship problem. I wish you the peace that comes from transforming unhappiness and the joy that comes from finding out how loving you really are.
I.

This feels awful. Can we start again and really listen to each other?
Though there were a few contenders, this deceptively simple message became the book’s lead flash card for a reason. It is a very powerful intervention because, first of all, it tells the Receiver something that I can almost promise you is out of his or her awareness—that you also are not exactly enjoying the proceedings. What a notion. Think about it—when you are experiencing your partner in any way as difficult—and this could run the gamut from “just not getting it” to downright perverse—are you also thinking, “I’m sure Marty isn’t enjoying this any more than I am”? No, you are probably not thinking this. In fact, it can even feel like Marty is enjoying whatever “this” is. So when you present this flash card to your co-weary partner, it is almost guaranteed to quickly “de–enemy-ize” you in their eyes and surprise them with the awareness that in this unpleasant, even adversarial, moment, you are both feeling the same thing: a distaste for what is going on.

The “really listen to each other” piece is also its own gift. The Sender is saying the greatest thing: “I know neither of us has been listening very well—and that includes me, sweetheart—and it is worth it to me to roll up my sleeves and do the thing that we both know needs to happen to turn this misery around: really get ourselves out of the way and hear each other. I’m up for it . . . you game?”

This is an extremely helpful flash card. The only caution I would use in regard to it is to choose a more self–responsible message acknowledging your own poor listening if, in fact, your partner actually has been relatively non–defensive, and the “we” in “Can we start again . . .” should be crossed out and replaced with an “I,” who really wants to listen better to a certain “you.”
2. I know I’m being defensive. Can you say this in a less charged way so I can feel safe with you?
Even defensiveness, you shall see, has never really been The Problem. It is unacknowledged defensiveness that has been the killer in just about every crummy interaction you have ever had. The moment, though, one of you takes ownership of your defensiveness, notice the extraordinary amount of Presence this brings into the room. To say, "I know I’m being defensive" means making the monumental shift from showing up as a reactive person mindlessly hitting, slamming or withholding the ball, to showing up as a sane, self-aware person with a high-level capacity to make tracking his insides a priority. Once this "Inner Tracker" reveals himself through this flash card, I can say with some assurance that the person on the receiving end will immediately get calmer. I can say this because, time and again in my work with couples, in the end it turns out that the person behaving in this allegedly "charged" manner was doing so precisely because she did not trust that there was A Someone across the way who was truly receiving her.

In the meantime, A Someone who is tracking his own defensiveness qualifies as A Someone you can trust because, no longer putting energy into protecting himself, he has energy available to listen. Moreover, in acknowledging his own defensiveness, he is communicating something major—that he is willing to own up to what happens to be True. The Sender, after all, is not telling the Receiver to be quiet. He is both inviting her to express herself in a way that will make it easier for her to be heard, and telling her he wants to feel safe with her. A very good deal for both parties.

This card originally started out saying, "...Can you say this in a gentler way so I can feel safe with you?" But it turned out that female recipients, in particular, felt sort of put down being seen as not-gentle—which brought another whole level of defensiveness into the mix ("So now you see me as cold and hard, is that it?"). This is in support of a more general point: when you want to feel safer with someone, you don’t have to get them to see how badly they are behaving. Just tell them you want to feel safer with them.
I wish you could hear this as me saying “yes” to myself—not “no” to you.
The reason we don’t have a flash card in this book that just says, "Please don’t take this personally," is because it would be a wasted card. Almost no one knows how to not take it personally.

If Marjorie wants fifteen more minutes on the phone with her girlfriend, when Paul is ready to watch the DVD . . . or Marjorie is ready to watch the movie and Paul needs fifteen minutes to check his email . . . or one of them wants to meditate or go to sleep or, God forbid, finish a gripping mystery when the other wants to make love . . . it’s a sure recipe for the other person to feel personally diminished or rejected or simply that they don’t matter all that much to their partner. People who were severely neglected in childhood or had extremely self-absorbed parents can, frankly, have a hard time making the distinction between "yes" to myself and "no" to you. But even the sturdier among us can feel depreciated by a partner’s choice, and this flash card is meant to soften that disappointment. Relationships provide endless forced-choice moments when conflicting agendas and/or realities require us to disappoint someone we love. You have worked tirelessly to land an impossible-to-schedule appointment with a highly desirable potential client. And later that night your partner informs you that he set up, at the exact same time, a medical appointment that he wants you to attend with him. Often you’ll cancel the client, of course, but there are those times when the medical condition is routine enough—and the consequences of canceling the client feel extreme enough—that you will be truly torn. Your partner will take it personally. A partner with years of personal growth work will likely still take it personally, but at least know that they are doing this. A partner who doesn’t take it personally has reached Enlightenment. Short of that, we recommend this flash card.