

BIJILDING BONDS

Why We Choose
the People We
Choose (*and
how to change it
if we want to*)

**"Essential,
insightful and
compassionate."**

Joshua Fletcher
best-selling author
and therapist

ZOË ASTON

This leads me to one very important fact, that you must hold in mind throughout this whole book: understanding and defining your relationships, more often than not, means understanding and defining yourself within your relationships. Therefore, we will be starting with your relationship with yourself, and then work through family, friends, romance, workplace relationships and finally online relationships. To break this down further and make myself very clear: we cannot define others through this work, we can only focus on ourselves and our contribution to the **relational dynamic**.

Your focus needs to be on your input, your thoughts, your feelings, your behaviours, rather than changing or impacting others. You are going to make your own choices. I'll remind you of this as we go, but for now, take a moment to consider your motivation(s) whilst doing the exercise below.

Exercise: Brainstorming



Grab a pen and paper, or use the notes section in the back of this book.

If you're anything like me, you'll read that and absolutely not do it. I get it, maybe you're reading this in bed, on a device or listening to an audio recording. Maybe you're on public transport or your kid is sleeping on you and it's an inconvenient suggestion, or too much effort to do the writing bit.

If you can write stuff down, great. If you are set on doing this in your head, then fine, but know that you won't have a written record of your thoughts and ideas and you might forget them – I always do. This stands for all further exercises in this book.

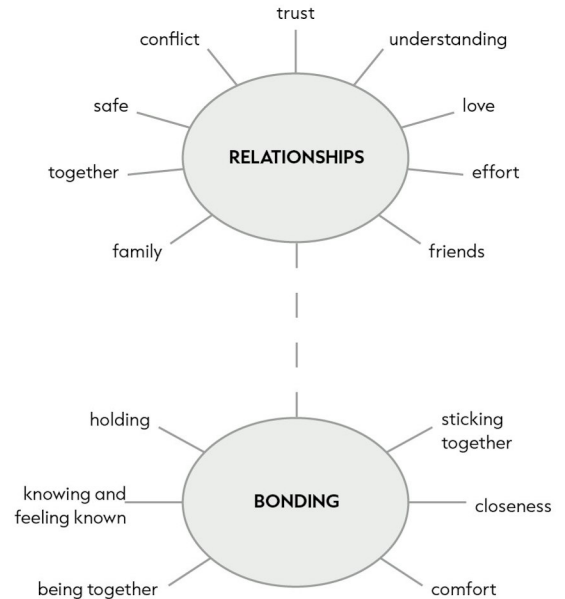
Write down or imagine the words 'relationship' and 'bonding'. Circle them. Now let yourself free fall about all the things that come to your mind in association with these words.

Here's an example:

In the diagram opposite I can see that my focus is on feeling safe and comfortable in relationships. So, my motivation while I do

this work could be to find safety in my relationships. Your focus might be on something different: you might want to be more intimate, vulnerable, to hold firmer boundaries, to be able to let love in more than you do right now... anything is possible.

From the words you've collected can you see what your focus indicates? Can you spot any motives or themes that interest or surprise you? There is no right or wrong – whatever you uncover is your truth in this moment. So, no judging yourself. Just observe, acknowledge and move on.



THIS BOOK WILL HELP YOU TO UNDERSTAND

- What your behaviours in relationships might mean.
- How your history impacts how you choose people.
- Why most of other people's behaviour has nothing to do with you and your value.
- How to adjust dysfunctional and unhelpful reactions and behaviours in yourself.
- How to cope with hurtful and damaging experiences like feeling rejected, abandoned and betrayed by others.
- How to relate to others with an idea of what you need and want, in whatever format of relationship you choose.
- How to always feel able to hold on to your self-worth.
- How to change who you choose to be in relationships with.

THE BUILDING BONDS DEFINITION OF RELATIONSHIPS AND BONDS (FOR THE SAKE OF CLARITY)

Practical changes are hard to make without an agreed definition of what we are changing. Although a definition of the words 'relationship' and 'bond' may seem like a funny thing to spend your valuable time on, I think it's worth breaking it down to make sure you know what these words mean to you.

Exercise: Reflection



Take a moment now to reflect on what your definition of the word 'relationship' is. You may like to use some of the words you came up with in the previous exercise to get you started.

Oxford Languages defines 'relationship' as:

1. The way in which two or more people or things are connected, or the state of being connected.
2. The state of being connected by blood or marriage.
3. The way in which two or more people or groups regard each other.

Do any of these descriptions help you think about your own definition of relationships?

What if I replace the word 'relationship' with 'bond'?

Oxford Languages defines 'bond' as:

1. A relationship between people or groups based on shared feelings, interests, or experiences.
2. Join or be joined securely to something else.

Based on all I've covered above and my personal and professional experience of building bonds, for the sake of this book, I would define the word 'relationship' as:

A grounded feeling of connection to myself which enables me to bond with people outside of myself.

INSTILLING HOPE

I always put a focus on hope in my work because it has single-handedly pulled me through the darkest moments of my life. My ability to hope has survived everything I've put it through in my personal life and has supported a great many people professionally over the years.

I see instilling hope as a primary requirement as a therapist. If a person doesn't have hope, they tend not to find much reason to invest time and effort towards the possibility of choice or change. That's not to say that if you're a bit hopeless you shouldn't bother. I've worked with clients who need me to hold on to hope for them before they are able to hope for themselves.

I have no idea why, but I understand that I am a naturally hopeful person, and in order to make sure I have covered all my bases I also have to own that it doesn't always work; nothing always works. I've certainly supported people who've eventually lost all hope and sadly felt they couldn't continue in this world. My heart aches when I think of each of them and the amount of pain they must have been in to make that choice. In my comparative clinical

experience, it's a rare choice to make and follow through with, and hard to understand fully because those people are not here to help us understand it. What we do know is that a total loss of hope often has its roots in our social lives and its biggest contributing factor seems to be a severely damaged sense of self-worth that leads us to feel we've run out of options. I have included a couple of books in the Further Reading section should you wish to find out more.

In her book *Atlas of the Heart* Brené Brown talks about hope as 'a function of struggle' and here I may find the answer to my query about why I am a hopeful person – because I have struggled. Brown says that we build hopefulness when we are faced with 'discomfort and adversity'. This really speaks to me because hope, as much as it is positioned as a positive experience, is actually constructed out of experiencing emotions such as fear, heartbreak, love, sadness, grief and anger.

It's easy to lose your way when feelings like those listed above bubble up. I invite you to reframe them and think about how hope is constructed within you. If it helps, you can use my voice, as you perceive it throughout this book, to support you continue building your future. What should happen over time is that you both *internalise* my hope and support as well as actively construct your own to support from within.

The trouble with hope

As I've already said, hope doesn't always work out. But sometimes there is a reason for that. Some of us have trouble with the concept of hoping because our internal voices kick off with phrases like 'don't get your hopes up' or 'hope for the best and expect the worst'. When you say negative things to yourself and don't really allow yourself to fully invest in the *felt sense* of hope, you are engaging in a protective strategy that prevents you from feeling the negative emotions listed above that can in fact help construct authentic hope. When we are using a protective strategy we may also feel disappointment and resentment, two feelings that often evolve when instilling hope isn't going the way you'd expected. When you're in this process you are also on a slippery slope towards shaming yourself for not getting something 'right'

before you've even tried.

I find shame and disappointment to be two of the most undesirable feelings. I will go out of my way and even lie to myself in order to avoid these emotions. The way to get around this is to separate hope from expectation. Unmet expectations are what lead us into disappointment and, ultimately, resentment because unmet expectations are conditional on outcomes; put differently, we make a choice based on what we think the outcome will be rather than because it's the best thing for our wellbeing.

Hope, however, is not attached to the outcome. It doesn't form attachments to what happens next. It's a far less judgmental way of thinking about things. If something doesn't go the way you hoped, hope can allow you to bounce back and move you forward once again, without expectation or judgement about what just happened.

Exercise: Nurturing a hope habit:



We all hope in slightly different ways and instilling hope is about you figuring out what type of hope to hold on to when things feel easy – and also when they feel hard. Here are four types of hope. See which one feels most familiar to you:

Realistic hope: *Orientated towards incremental changes. For example: 'I hope, after a good night's sleep, I feel a little bit better in the morning.'*

Utopian hope: *Contemplates what's happening right now and brings hope and power together to hold out hope for the future. Protests and movement groups like Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion and Me Too are a great example of utopian hope.*

Chosen hope: *The hopeful feeling you choose to have even when things are happening to you or around you that leave you feeling helpless and powerless. For example: 'Things feel awful right now and I really hope something will happen to bring about change in the near future.'*

Transcendent hope: *When hope is part of your daily being and personality. It's a general feeling of optimism and hopefulness about the future. For example, living by the following mantras: 'This too shall pass' and 'One day at a time'.*

If you do not identify with any of these definitions of hope, ask yourself the following:

- *Is there anyone in your life who you view as hopeful?*
- *What do you like about the way they express hope about things?*
- *Can you imagine yourself borrowing a bit of their hope for a while?*

If life feels hopeless a lot of the time, it is a good idea to speak to a therapist or mental health professional. You will find ways of contacting mental health professionals on pages 225-226.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is split into six chapters. Chapter One ('Self') looks at your relationship with yourself, Chapter Two is a short chapter which provides essential information about boundaries, wants and needs and attachment styles, Chapter Three focuses on Family Relationships, Chapter Four covers Friendships, Chapter Five looks at Romantic Relationships and dating, Chapter Six is all about Workplace Relationships and Chapter Seven explores Online and Digital Relationships.

Each main chapter starts with a reflective statement for you to ponder, before providing an in-depth exploration of each type of relationship and several practical exercises. I've structured the information offered to reflect the developmental process of each relationship and the different choices that can be made along the way, and why.

For example: how it begins, what the journey of that relationship generally looks like throughout your lifespan, and the effect that your choices can have on you, both positive and negative. We

will also focus on how to work with difficulties and differences which will include resolving conflict and how to communicate more effectively, as well as support to help you move on from relationships that no longer serve you, should you choose to.

The chapters and indeed the subtitled sections, stand alone in their own right so you can read them in any order and refer to them at any time. I do urge you to read the information in the order I have written it as the book builds on itself. However, if you do choose to read things out of order, I have cross-referenced as much as possible so you can read the connecting information.

We are going to cover a lot of ground and it's likely that not everything will apply to you right now... At the very end of each chapter is a summary which includes the main messages we've covered. Reading this will help you condense the information so you can come back to it when you feel it is more relevant to you and your life.

It's to be expected, when you are reading about relationships, that you start to think of the people in your life who 'should' know, read, understand or reflect on the same messages. In my experience, it is *impossible* to get someone to read a book if they don't want to. BUT you might just be able to get them to take 60 seconds to read the summary and then, maybe you can share what you learned with them verbally. If they will not even read the summary in their own time, read it to them and see if it sparks any interest. If that's not realistic, do yourself a favour and let it go – focus on yourself.

At the back of the book, you'll find further reading lists and web links for each chapter, as well as guidance on contacting mental health professionals and support teams. On pages 228-232 you will also find a glossary of terms. If I have not defined a term within the main text of the book, the first use of each defined term will appear as ***bold italic*** text and be defined in the glossary. If you don't know what something means, please read the definition as it'll support your understanding of the content.

Before we get started I need you to know that...

In relationships, and pretty much all of life, there are two types