

C O N N E C T E D · T A L K 4

Navigating **CONFLICT**

Turning tension into growth

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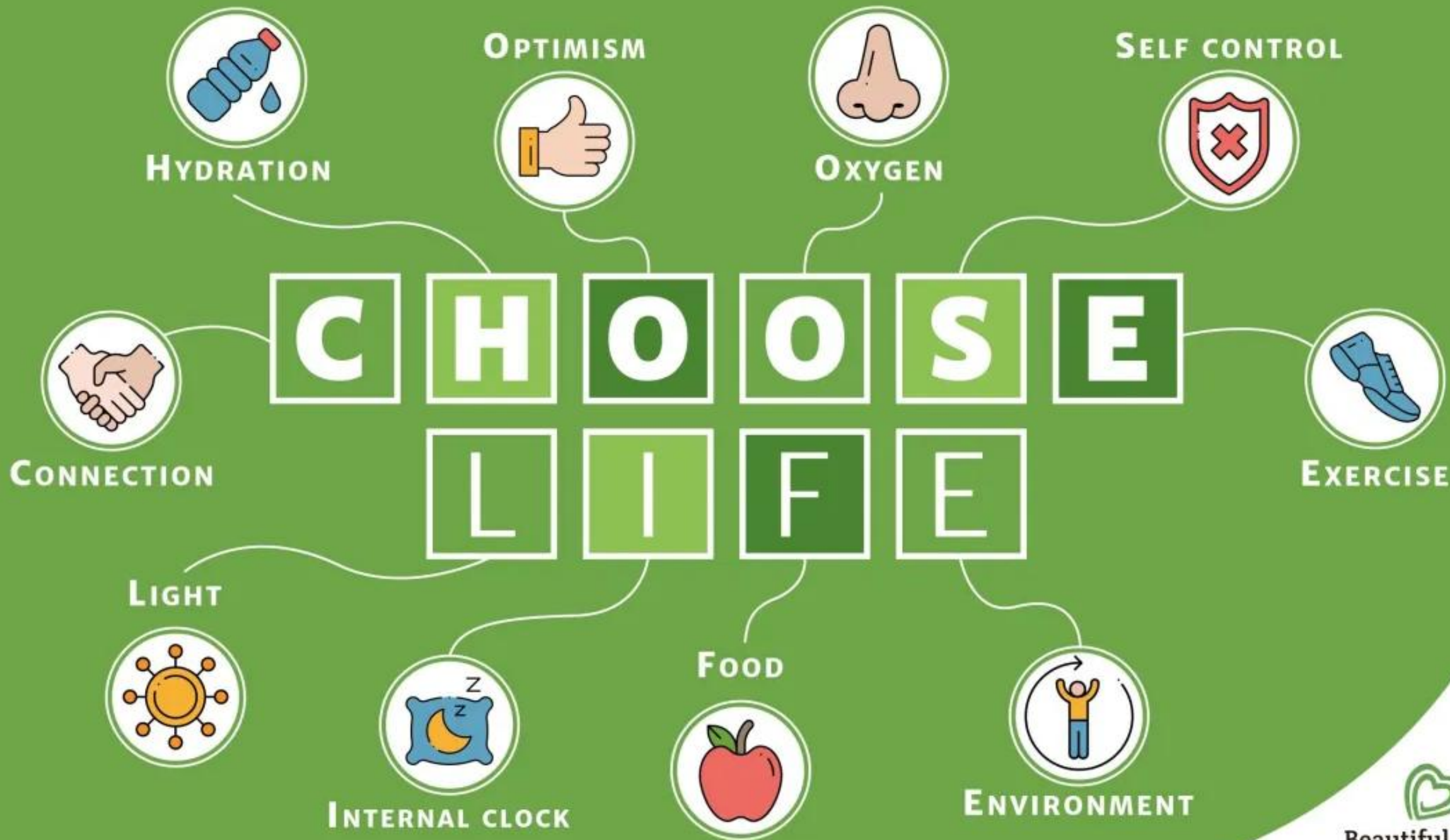


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H E B R E W S 1 2 : 1 4 – 1 5

"Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord:

"Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled."

a root of bitterness...

Conflict left unrepaired doesn't stay still — it spreads.

Where we're going today

Five movements — from the storm, to the science, to Scripture, to skills, to a heaven at home.

1

Why this matters

Conflict is universal — and how we fight shapes everything: our kids, our health, our witness.

2

What the science tells us

Forty years in the Love Lab — the Four Horsemen, Masters vs. Disasters, and the predictor of divorce.

3

What Scripture has always known

Iron sharpening iron, the soft answer, and the call to be peacemakers.

4

Six skills you can practice

Start soft. Accept influence. De-escalate. Repair. Build fondness. Turn toward.

5

Living it out at home

Turning the home into a little heaven on earth — and a bridge to forgiveness.

By the end: a vocabulary and a few simple moves you can use this week.

Why this talk matters

Every long relationship has conflict. The question isn't whether — but how.

- **Conflict is universal**

Marriage, parenting, church, work — friction is built into close relationships.

- **Most of us were never taught how**

We learned by watching our parents — for better or worse.

- **How we fight shapes everything**

Children's stress biology, our own health, marital longevity, and our witness.

- **The science and Scripture agree**

Forty years of relationship research keeps confirming what the Bible has always taught.



Two views on conflict

Something to avoid

- Conflict means we don't really love each other.
- Good marriages have no fights.
- Keep the peace — at any cost.
- Silence is safer than speaking up.

A doorway to growth

- Conflict is the cost of closeness.
- How we fight matters more than whether we fight.
- Repair builds the marriage; perfection isn't the goal.
- Honest, gentle truth heals.

"Iron sharpeneth iron..." — Proverbs 27:17

What destructive conflict does — to us

Chronic, hostile conflict shows up in the body.

↑ IL-6

Inflammatory markers rise the whole day after a fight (Wilson et al., 2018)

+11 bpm

Resting heart rate is ~11 bpm higher in unhappy couples (Gottman & Levenson, 1992)

↓ immunity

Hostile conflict slows wound healing and lowers immune function (Kiecolt-Glaser studies)

Conflict doesn't just hurt your feelings — it shapes your biology.

When couples' heart-rate-variability rhythms became synchronized during arguments, they showed elevated inflammation for the rest of the day.

What destructive conflict does — to children

63%

of U.S. parents reported at least one act of verbal aggression toward a child in the past year — averaging 12.6 acts (Vissing et al., 1991, N=3,346).

Children of high-conflict homes show:

- Higher cortisol reactivity and sleep disruption
- More anxiety, depression, and aggression
- Lower academic performance and peer functioning
- Adult relationships that mirror what they saw at home

Children don't need a perfect home — they need a home where conflict gets repaired.

What healthy conflict gives back

Done well, conflict isn't the enemy of love — it's one of the engines of it.



Deeper intimacy

Honest disagreement, well-handled, builds more trust than polite avoidance ever can.



Personal growth

Iron sharpens iron. Your partner's pushback is often the truest mirror you'll ever look into.



Stronger attachment

Repaired ruptures bond couples together. Children, too, feel safer after a fight that ends well.



Real problem-solving

Issues finally get named, decided, and put down — instead of dragged through every dinner.



Modeling for the kids

Children learn how to fight by watching us. Healthy conflict is one of the great teaching moments of parenting.



A more honest faith

Pretending peace dishonors truth. Real reconciliation requires real disagreement first.

"Open rebuke is better than secret love." — Proverbs 27:5

What we actually fight about

Nationwide study of 593 U.S. parents (Larsen & Barton, 2025, Journal of Family Issues):

TOP CONFLICTS IN COUPLES

- 1 **Communication**
- 2 **Mood and tempers**
- 3 **Parenting**
- 4 **Household chores**
- 5 **Money management**

PARENTS & TEENS

- Untidy rooms and chores
- Technology and phone use

PARENTS & YOUNGER CHILDREN

- Bedtime delays
- Obeying instructions
- Picky eating

P R O V E R B S 2 7 : 1 7

*"Iron sharpeneth iron;
so a man sharpeneth the countenance of
his friend."*



Friction between committed people can sharpen — if handled well.

The question of this hour: how do we let conflict shape us — without it crushing us?

PART TWO

What the science tells us

Meet the Gottmans

John & Julie Gottman

"Love Lab" at the University of Washington

40+ years of research on real couples

3,000+ couples studied in the Love Lab

40,000+ couples followed over decades



They could predict divorce — with over 90% accuracy

> 90%

accuracy in Gottman's lab

From just a few minutes of conflict, they coded:

- Tone of voice and facial expression
- Ratio of positive to negative moments
- Heart rate and physiology
- How the discussion was started
- Whether repair attempts worked

From 3 minutes of conversation — divorce predicted at 82.6%. From the positive rebound conversation — 92.7%.

It isn't magic. It's a microscope on what every couple is doing in plain sight.

Inside the Love Lab — one couple, one conversation

University of Washington, Family Research Lab. A small studio apartment with cameras, microphones, and heart-rate sensors.

The setup

Gottman's team asked newlywed couples — like Angie and Dave — to discuss a recurring point of friction for just fifteen minutes, then watch the tape together. Every facial expression and tone was coded second by second.

What looked ordinary

- A brief eye-roll when she brought up money
- A defensive "Well, you do the same thing..."
- A quiet half-second of silence after a complaint
- A small joke that didn't quite land

What the lab saw

- Contempt — the strongest predictor of divorce
- Defensiveness blocking repair
- Stonewalling — a heart rate already over 100 bpm
- A failed repair attempt the spouse didn't catch

The Gottmans predicted, with over 90% accuracy, which couples would still be together six years later. They were almost always right — from fifteen minutes of conversation.

Masters vs. Disasters

Gottman's lab found two patterns repeating across thousands of couples.

T H E M A S T E R S

Building a culture of appreciation

- Scan for what to thank each other for
- Speak with respect, even in disagreement
- Soften the start of hard conversations
- Repair quickly when things go wrong
- Stay curious about the partner's world

T H E D I S A S T E R S

Scanning for mistakes

- Notice what the partner is doing wrong
- Criticize the person, not the problem
- Start hard conversations with a complaint
- Let resentments accumulate unaddressed
- Withdraw when overwhelmed

“Let all seek to discover the excellencies rather than the defects. Often it is our own attitude... which determines what will be revealed to us in another.” Ellen G. White. Ministry of Healing, p. 360

The first 3 minutes decide the next 10 years

In Gottman's data, how a discussion begins predicts almost everything about how it ends.

H A R S H S T A R T - U P

"You never help around here. You don't care about this family."

Criticism + character attack.

Outcome: defensiveness, escalation, withdrawal.

S O F T S T A R T - U P

"I'm feeling overwhelmed by the housework. Could we figure out a plan together?"

"I" statement + specific + positive need.

Outcome: cooperation, problem-solving.

"A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger." — Proverbs 15:1

The thousand small moments

Gottman calls them "bids" — tiny invitations for attention, affection, or support.

"Look at that bird outside!" → Turn toward, turn against, or turn away?

86%

Couples still together at 6-year follow-up
turned toward bids

33%

Couples who had divorced
turned toward bids

Marriages don't end in court. They end in a thousand small moments of turning away.

The Four Horsemen of relationship breakdown



- 1 Criticism**
Attack on character, not behavior
- 2 Contempt**
Mockery, sneering — #1 predictor of divorce
- 3 Defensiveness**
Self-protection, counter-attack
- 4 Stonewalling**
Shutting down, withdrawing

Each Horseman has an antidote

THE HORSEMAN

ITS ANTIDOTE

1

Criticism

Attack on character



Gentle start-up

Speak about yourself; describe what you need

2

Contempt

Mockery, sneering, disgust



Build a culture of appreciation

Daily — name what's right; remember why you chose them

3

Defensiveness

Counter-attack, victim mode



Take responsibility

"Yes — that part is on me." Even 10% ownership cools the room

4

Stonewalling

Shutting down, withdrawing



Self-soothe

Pause 20+ minutes. Calm down. Then return.

The pattern is reversible. None of us is doomed — but none of us drifts into healthy patterns either.

Contempt: the most corrosive force in marriage

"Contempt is our best single predictor of divorce."

— John Gottman, NPR interview (2005)

What contempt sounds like:

- Eye-rolling, sighing, sneering
- Sarcasm, mockery, name-calling
- *"You think YOU'RE tired? Try doing what I do."*
- *"You're just like your mother."*

And it doesn't just predict divorce — it predicts how many infectious illnesses your spouse will have in the next four years.

But "never fighting" isn't the answer either

Some couples avoid every disagreement. They look peaceful — and they often quietly drift apart.

Avoiders look like...

- Always polite, rarely honest
- Resentments stored up, not spoken
- A growing emotional distance
- "Roommates" rather than partners
- Surprise divorce after 20+ years

Healthy couples instead...

- Raise concerns when they matter
- Speak truth in love, with timing
- Repair quickly when wounds appear
- Tolerate discomfort for honesty
- Choose closeness over comfort

"Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath." — Ephesians 4:26

The Key Ratio: 5 to 1 DURING Conflict!

The single number that best separates marriages that flourish from marriages that fail.

F O R E V E R Y

H E A L T H Y M A R R I A G E S H A V E

1 → 5

negative moment

positive moments — appreciation, humor, affection, attention

In unstable marriages — the ratio is 0.8 to 1.

Far more negative moments. The love bank is being overdrawn.

Note: outside conflict the ratio should be at least 20:1

PART THREE

What Scripture has always known

Three things, in order

J A M E S 1 : 1 9 – 2 0

"Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God."

1.

Swift to hear

Listen first. Listen to understand, not to reply.

2.

Slow to speak

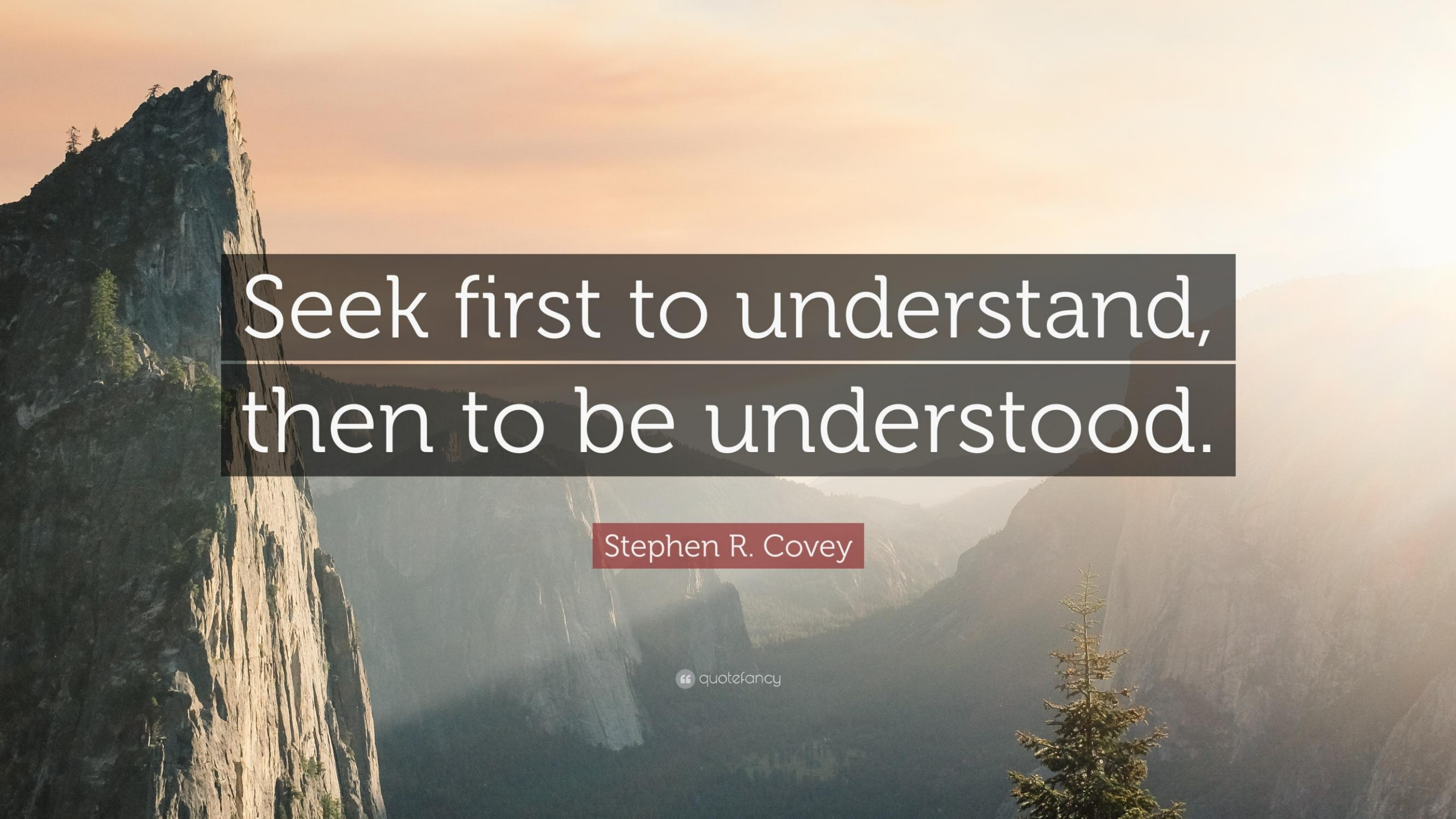
Choose words deliberately. Most damage is done in haste.

3.

Slow to wrath

Reactive anger does not produce righteous outcomes.

Two ears, one mouth. That's the order — and that's the ratio.



Seek first to understand,
then to be understood.

Stephen R. Covey

Over two thousand years ago — and last week's lab

SCRIPTURE

Proverbs 15:1

*"A soft answer turneth away wrath:
but grievous words stir up anger."*

One person choosing softness can break the cycle.

SCIENCE

Soft start-up

*How a conversation begins predicts how it
ends — with 96% accuracy in Gottman's
lab.*

Soft start-up: "I feel... about... and I need..."

What to put away — and what to put on

E P H E S I A N S 4 : 2 6 – 2 7 , 3 1 – 3 2

"Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: neither give place to the devil.

*...Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you,
with all malice:*

*And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake
hath forgiven you."*

Anger isn't sinful — but unresolved anger becomes a foothold. And the model for our forgiveness is the cross.

The root of most conflict

P H I L I P P I A N S 2 : 3 – 4

"Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.

Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others."

D i a g n o s i s :

"strife and vainglory" — pride dressed up as principle

A n t i d o t e :

"lowliness of mind" — what we now call perspective-taking

Reconciliation before worship

M A T T H E W 5 : 2 3 – 2 4

"Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee;

Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift."

Jesus puts reconciliation BEFORE worship.

Walk out of the service. Make the call. Send the text. Then come back to the altar.

PART FOUR

Six skills you can practice

Three ways couples handle conflict

Gottman's lab found three patterns that recur across decades of couples.

Avoiders

"Let's not talk about it."

- Minimize, sidestep, change the subject
- Keep the peace on the surface
- Little persuasion, little engagement
- Slowly drift apart over years

Risk: distance accumulates. Avoidance during fights (stonewalling) is one of the Four Horsemen — a top predictor of divorce.

Battlers

"I'm going to win this."

- Engage hot — loud, intense, dramatic
- Argue to win, not to understand
- Cycle between attack and defense
- Big highs followed by big lows

Risk: criticism and contempt creep in. Contempt is the single greatest predictor of divorce.

Collaborators

"Help me understand."

- Soft start, calm tone, low blame
- Listen first, then speak
- Repair quickly when things go sideways
- Five positives for every one negative

Outcome: best on every long-term measure of satisfaction, stability, and resilience.

The takeaway: you can change your style. Most of us were never taught — and the science says collaboration can be learned at any

Six skills — repeatable, learnable, biblical

1

Start soft

Use "I" + situation + need

2

Stay calm — or step away

Watch your heart rate

3

Get curious about the dream

Behind every fight is a longing

4

Find flexibility

Negotiate around what you can

5

Repair, repair, repair

The secret weapon of strong couples

6

Plan the next round

Talk about how you talked

Skill 1 — Start soft- How

Three sentences, in this order:

Step 1

"I feel _____"

Name the feeling — not the verdict.

Step 2

"about _____"

Describe the specific situation — not the person's character.

Step 3

"and I need _____"

Ask for a positive — what you want, not what you don't.

"I feel worn out about how late we're running tonight — and I need us to leave by 6:30 next time."

Right time, right place- When and Where

Even a good conversation has a wrong moment. Pick the time as carefully as the words.

Don't start the conversation when you are...

Hungry · Angry · Lonely · Tired

...and not in front of:

- The kids
- Extended family or guests
- A phone, a screen, a half-finished meal
- A church foyer or a parking lot

"I want this talk — but not right now. Can we do it tomorrow over a cup of tea?"

And probably not late at night.

After ~10 PM →

- Prefrontal control weakens
 - Negative emotion runs hotter
 - Self-control is at its lowest of the day
 - Risky, impulsive decisions spike overnight
-

"The mind after midnight" is biased toward impulsivity, narrowed attention, and impaired judgment.

Rule of thumb: *If it can wait until breakfast, let it wait until breakfast.*

"Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath." — Ephesians 4:26

Sources: [Tubbs et al., 2022, Front. Netw. Physiol.](#); [Gordon & Chen, 2014, Soc. Psychol. Personal. Sci.](#); [Baumeister et al., 1998 \(self-control & ego depletion\).](#)

A true story — a soft start-up that may have saved the world

October 26–27, 1962. The world held its breath.

For thirteen days, Soviet missiles in Cuba had brought the U.S. and U.S.S.R. to the edge of nuclear war.

Two letters arrived from Khrushchev.

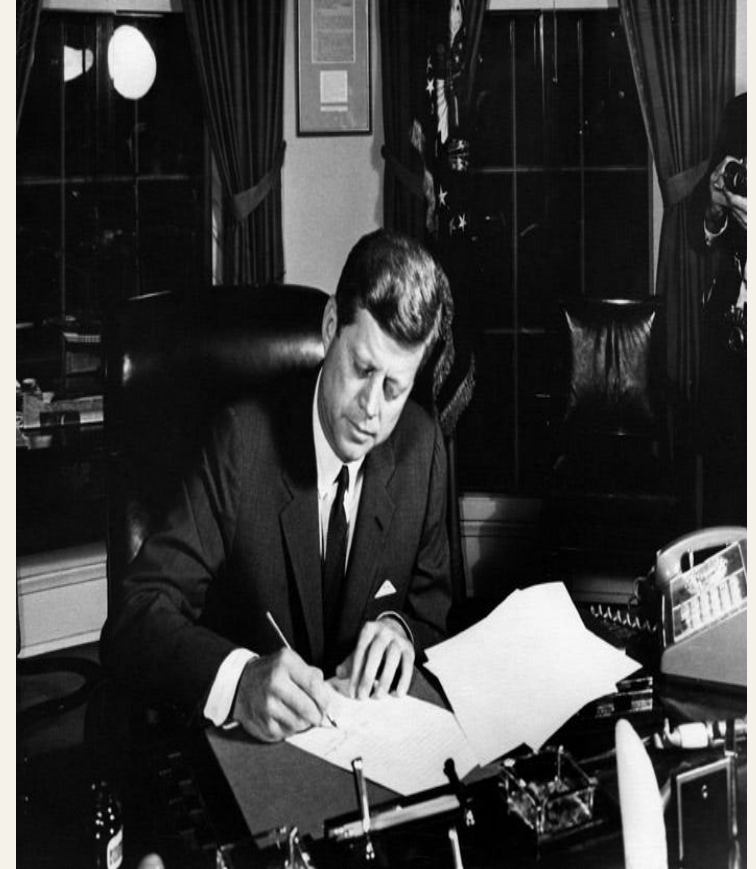
Oct 26 — long, emotional, conciliatory. Hinted at removing missiles if the U.S. promised not to invade Cuba.

Oct 27 — hardened, public, with a new demand: remove U.S. missiles from Turkey.

Kennedy's move:

Reply to the soft letter. Ignore the harsh one. Address Khrushchev as a fellow human carrying the same fear — not as an enemy who had just escalated.

He chose the conciliatory voice when he had every reason to match the harsh one. The crisis ended within 48 hours.



President Kennedy, 1962

Skill 2 — Watch the heart rate

When the body is flooded, the brain stops working for the relationship.

> 100 bpm

"If your heart rate exceeds 100 beats per minute, you won't be able to hear what your spouse is trying to tell you — no matter how hard you try."

What to do:

- Say: "I'm getting flooded — I need 20 minutes."
- Step away — walk, breathe, drink water. (Don't ruminate.)
- Come back at the agreed time. This is not stonewalling — it's a repair.

Skill 3 — Get curious about the dream

69%

—
of marital conflicts are
perpetual.

They will never be solved.

So what do healthy couples do?

They stop trying to win. They get curious about what's underneath.

Try asking your partner:

- *"What does this mean to you?"*
- *"Is there a history to this for you?"*
- *"What's your hope or dream behind it?"*
- *"What would feel like a win for you?"*

Most fights aren't really about what they're about. Behind every position is a longing.

Skill 4 — Find flexibility



The "bagel" exercise

Julie Gottman's tool from Fight Right (2024):

- In the HOLE: the few things that are truly non-negotiable
- On the BAGEL: the larger area where you can be flexible

Now ask:

"What's on the bagel for me?"

"What's in the hole for me?"

"What might be in the hole for them?"

"Blessed are the peacemakers." — Matthew 5:9

Skill 5 — Repair, repair, repair

Masters don't fight less. They repair more — and faster.

Verbal repair

"Wait — let me start over."

"That came out wrong."

"I hear you. I'm sorry."

Physical repair

A hand on the arm.

A pause to make eye contact.

Sitting closer instead of farther.

Humor repair

A shared inside joke.

A self-deprecating smile.

(Only if you both feel it.)

Repair attempts are "the secret weapon of emotionally intelligent couples."

Failed repair is the single best predictor — beyond all four Horsemen — of divorce.

Skill 6 — Plan the next round

After every hard conversation, talk about how you talked.

- 1 *What did I do well in that conversation?*
- 2 *What did I do that I'd like to do differently next time?*
- 3 *What did you do that helped me?*
- 4 *What would help me most when this comes up again?*
- 5 *When can we revisit it?*

Repetition is where skill is built. The next conversation is always more important than this one.

PART FIVE

Living it out at home

Most fights don't get solved — and that's OK

69%

of all relationship conflicts

are “perpetual” — they will never be fully resolved.

— Gottman, after 40 years in the lab

What this means for us:

Most fights aren't about the dishes.

They're about deeper differences in personality, values, or life dreams — differences that don't go away because they're who we are.

The goal is management, not victory.

Healthy couples don't solve perpetual problems. They learn to talk about them with humor, affection, and acceptance — again and again.

Sometimes we agree to disagree.

Two different people will see some things two different ways forever. That's not a deal-breaker — it's the texture of every long marriage.

"Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another." — Romans 12:10

The 31% we can fix. The 69% we learn to love anyway.

Source: [Gottman & Silver, 1999, The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work](#); [Gottman, NPR interview, 2024](#).

What the home is meant to be

"Home should be made all that the word implies. It should be a little heaven upon earth, a place where the affections are cultivated instead of being studiously repressed."

— *The Adventist Home*, p. 15



"Home should be a place where cheerfulness, courtesy, and love abide; and where these graces dwell, there will abide happiness and peace. Troubles may invade, but these are the lot of humanity. Let patience, gratitude, and love keep sunshine in the heart, though the day may be ever so cloudy. In such homes angels of God abide."

— *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 393

Where the science describes what works, Scripture describes what was always meant to be.

The cost of uncontrolled words

"We must subdue a hasty temper and control our words, and in this we shall gain great victories.

Unless we control our words and temper, we are slaves to Satan. He leads us captive.

All jangling and unpleasant, impatient, fretful words are an offering presented to his satanic majesty. And it is a costly offering, more costly than any sacrifice we can make for God; for it destroys the peace and happiness of whole families, destroys health, and is eventually the cause of forfeiting an eternal life of happiness."

— Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 437

"In silence there is safety. Often silence is the severest rebuke that could be given to the one who has sinned with his lips." — AH 442.2

Stay humble — especially in church

"Never question the motives of your brethren; for as you judge them, God has declared you will be judged. Open your hearts to kindness, to the cheering rays of the Sun of Righteousness."

— *Review and Herald*, March 12, 1895

"There is no more effectual hindrance to growth in grace than this disposition to criticize and condemn others. ...this accusing spirit gradually enter[s] the hearts of church-members until it had leavened nearly the entire church."

— *Historical Sketches*, p. 212

A holistic prescription

When conflict shows up — try this, in this order:

1

Pray before you speak

"Lord, give me lowliness of mind." (Phil 2:3)

2

Calm your body

If heart rate is high — drink water, walk, breathe, return in 20 minutes.

3

Start soft

"I feel ___ about ___ and I need ___."

4

Listen for the dream

"What does this mean to you?"

5

Find one repair

Even one: "I see you. I'm sorry I hurt you."

6

Sleep on it, but not on wrath

"Let not the sun go down upon your wrath." (Eph 4:26)

J O H N 1 7 : 2 1

"That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us:

that the world may believe that thou hast sent me."

Unity in the home is the world's clearest preview of the gospel.

Conflict resolved becomes evangelism. Conflict unresolved becomes a counter-witness.

How we resolve our conflicts at home is the loudest sermon our children, neighbors, and church will ever hear.



N E X T T I M E — T A L K 5

Forgiveness

Even the best repair has limits. Some wounds cut deeper than "I'm sorry" can reach.

Next time — we explore the deepest skill of all: forgiveness.

*"...forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you." —
Ephesians 4:32*

Thank you

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