

Say it this week

A short book about putting off the difficult conversation
until it becomes a worse one

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can
contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

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Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit. There's something you need to say to someone, and you haven't said it. It might be to your partner, a friend, a parent, a colleague or the person you share a flat with. You've known for weeks or months that the conversation is coming. You've had it in your head many times. You're waiting for the right moment, and the right moment hasn't arrived.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that waiting makes sense from the inside. It feels kind, it keeps the day pleasant, and reluctance to deliver unwelcome news is one of the steadier findings in the study of how people talk to each other. The second is that waiting doesn't leave the conversation where it was. The subject grows while you wait, and so does your feeling about it, and the conversation you finally have is worse than the one you were avoiding. It's often at a bad time and in a bad tone, and it's about ten things where it might have been about one. The third is practical. You name the thing in one sentence, choose a time within the week, write your first two sentences in advance, and say them. Chapters 12 to 14 cover how.

Nothing in this book asks you to become blunt, to say everything you think, or to pick fights. Most of what annoys us about other people isn't worth a conversation, and chapter 3 gives a test for what is. Nothing here asks you to have it out with someone you've sensibly decided to see less of.

Three cautions.

This book assumes that the person you need to talk to is safe to talk to. If you're holding back because you're afraid of what they'll do, that isn't the habit I'm describing, and the advice here could be wrong for you. The NHS page on domestic abuse asks two questions that are worth reading slowly. Have you ever felt afraid of your partner? Have you ever changed your behaviour because you're afraid of what they might do? If the answer to either is yes, the freephone National Domestic Abuse Helpline is open day and night on 0808 2000 247, and chapter 15 says more.

Some conversations need more than a book. If the subject is separation, a serious problem at work, or anything with legal consequences, get proper advice alongside anything you read here.

And if the thing you've been carrying is affecting your sleep and your mood badly, and has been for weeks, that's worth mentioning to a GP whatever you decide about the conversation.

If you read the first few chapters and find you're ready, don't wait for the end of the book. Chapter 12 can be read on its own. The notes at the back give my sources and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

The car park

It's a Sunday in August and you're in the car park of a pub where your partner's family have just had lunch.

The children are strapped in. Your partner, Sam, is putting the pushchair in the boot and says, cheerfully enough, "I told Dave I'd do the long ride next Saturday, so I'll be back about four." And you hear yourself say, much louder than you meant to, "Of course you will. You're never here. I do everything and you swan off every single weekend and you don't even notice."

Sam looks as though you've slapped him. Then his face closes.

"Where's this come from? You've never said a word about Saturdays." His mother is twenty feet away, pretending to look for her keys. The drive home is silent. That evening there's a row that starts with Saturdays and goes through his mother, the holiday you didn't want and something he said at Christmas two years ago. By eleven o'clock neither of you can remember what the subject was.

Here's what the subject was. Since March, Sam has gone cycling with his club every Saturday from eight until about two. Since March, you've had both children on your own for most of every Saturday. You mind this. You don't mind the cycling itself, which you can see is good for him. You mind that it's every week and that it was never discussed. You'd like some time of your own too. It's a reasonable thing to mind, and there was a reasonable conversation to be had about it. You've been meaning to have that conversation since April.

You nearly raised it in May, but he'd had a bad week at work. In June you decided to wait until after the holiday. In July you started sighing on Friday evenings and being a bit short with him on Saturday afternoons, and hoped he'd ask what was wrong. He didn't. In bed you ran through what you'd say. In those rehearsals you were calm and clear, he was defensive and unfair, and you'd lie awake annoyed at things he hadn't actually said.

Then it came out by itself, in a car park in front of his mother, as "you're never here".

I'll use a few terms throughout. **The thing** is the subject you need to raise. **The rehearsal** is the conversation you hold in your head in place of the real one. **The hint** is any attempt to get the message across without saying it, such as a sigh, a joke with an edge, or going quiet. **The blow-up** is what happens when the thing comes out on its own, at a time and in a tone you didn't choose.

Putting off a conversation has some regular features. This list is my own observation and not a research finding.

You know what the thing is. This isn't a vague unease. If someone asked, you could state it in a sentence, and that tells you it's ready to be said.

You're waiting for a moment that would make it easy. It has to be a time when they're in a good mood but not so good that you'd spoil it, and when you're calm and there's time and nobody's tired. Weeks can pass without one.

You're having the conversation anyway, alone. The rehearsals are frequent, and the other person always plays their worst self in them.

And it leaks. You think you're concealing the thing, but it comes out as coolness and short answers, and the other person can tell something's wrong without knowing what.

Try one thing before reading on. Write down, in one sentence, the thing you've been putting off saying, and who it's to. Under it, write roughly when you first knew you needed to say it. If you can't think of anything, this may not be your habit. If the date is more than a month ago, read on. And if, having written it, you feel like going and saying it now, go. The book will keep.

Why waiting feels kinder

If you put off difficult conversations, you may have decided that you're a coward. I don't think you are, and the research doesn't either. Reluctance to pass on unwelcome news is ordinary human behaviour, and it shows up even when people have nothing at stake.

In 1970 Sidney Rosen and Abraham Tesser gave this reluctance a name. They called it the MUM effect, as in keeping mum. I haven't been able to read their original paper, so I'll describe a later experiment that I could check. Jayson Dibble and Timothy Levine asked 114 people to pass on a test result to a stranger. Some had a high score to report, some a middling one and some a low one. The lower the score, the longer people took to start speaking and the more reluctant they said they felt. The person hearing the news was a stranger, and the messenger bore no blame for the score. They still hesitated. People are quick to share good news and slow to share bad, and that seems to be built in fairly deep.

Work is no different. Frances Milliken, Elizabeth Morrison and Patricia Hewlin interviewed 40 employees about speaking up to their bosses. Most had been in a situation where something concerned them and they said nothing. The reason they gave most often was fear of being seen or labelled in a negative way, and of damaging relationships they valued. That's a small interview study and I wouldn't lean on its numbers. But the reason will be familiar. People mostly keep quiet because they're afraid of what speaking will do to how they're seen and to the relationship, and hardly ever because they don't care.

So here are the reasons for waiting, as I understand them, and each of them is real.

It keeps today pleasant. This evening is fine as it is. Raising the thing would make this evening worse for certain, in exchange for a benefit that's uncertain and later.

It seems kind. They're tired, or stressed, or happy, and you don't want to be the one to bring them down. Holding back looks like consideration.

It protects how they see you. You'd like to be thought of as easy-going, generous and low-maintenance. The thing, once said, might make you look petty or demanding.

It might go away. Some problems do. Perhaps the cycling season will end, the flatmate will move out, or the colleague will get a different job. Waiting costs nothing, it seems, and might save the whole ordeal.

And you're afraid of the reaction. They might be hurt, or angry, or turn it round on you. They might say something back that you don't want to hear.

Underneath these are needs nobody should be ashamed of. You want a peaceful home and good relationships. You want to be kind, and to be liked. You don't want a scene. The question for the next several chapters is whether waiting gets you any of those things. I'll argue that it gets you none of them for long.

One distinction will help before we go on. There's a difference between deciding not to raise something and putting off raising it. If you decide not to, the matter is closed. You've judged that the thing is too small, or isn't your business, or can't be changed, and you've let it go, and it stops taking up room in your head. If you're putting it off, the matter is still open. You still intend to say it, you still rehearse it, and it still leaks. This book has no quarrel with the first. It's about the second, where the conversation has already been decided on and only the date is missing.

"It'll sort itself out"

Sometimes it does. It would be dishonest to pretend otherwise, and the habit survives partly because of the times it worked. A colleague was irritating and then got transferred. A friend went through a selfish patch and came out of it. You said nothing and the problem dissolved.

So it's worth being able to tell in advance which kind of thing you're holding. Here's a rough test, and it's my own and not drawn from research. Ask three questions about the thing.

Is it a one-off or a pattern? A friend who was short with you once, on a bad day, has given you nothing to discuss. One who's been short with you for three months has.

Does it depend on something that's about to change by itself? If the noisy neighbours move out next month, you can probably live with four more weekends. If nothing is scheduled to change, then it won't.

Has it stopped bothering you when you're not reminded of it? Things that are fading need no conversation. If you find yourself rehearsing, the thing is still live.

If the answers are pattern, nothing's changing and still rehearsing, then the thing won't sort itself out. You've already run that experiment. Every week you've waited has been a test of whether it would, and you have the results.

Now look at what an unraised pattern does while you wait. I can see four things, and again this is reasoning and not research.

It repeats, and each repetition adds to your file. In April you minded one Saturday. By August you mind twenty, and you remember most of them. The thing you'd have raised in April was small and recent. The one you're carrying now has a history, and the history will want to be heard.

It sets. Arrangements that go unchallenged become the way things are done. After five months, Saturday cycling is no longer something Sam started doing. It has become his Saturday. He's built plans and friendships on it. Asking him to change it in April would have been a small request about a new habit, and by August you're asking him to give up part of his life. His surprise will be genuine, too, because as far as he knows it's been fine with you all along.

Your silence gets read as agreement. People mostly assume that if something bothered you, you'd say. It's a reasonable assumption, and it's the one you make about them. Every week you don't mention the thing is a week in which the other person collects evidence that you're content.

And your feeling about it changes character. At the start you minded the thing. After months you mind that they haven't noticed you mind. A second grievance has been added to the first, and the second is often the more bitter. You now hold it against them that they didn't see it for themselves. Chapter 5 looks at whether that's fair.

Put together, this means that waiting isn't neutral. It's tempting to picture the conversation as sitting on a shelf, the same size whenever you choose to take it down. It doesn't keep. The thing you'd have raised in April was a small, fresh, specific request. By August you have a large and stale complaint with a history attached to it.

I should say something about things that can't be changed. Some of what we put off saying is about a fact and not a behaviour. "I was hurt that you didn't come to the funeral." Nothing can be done about it now. These don't grow in quite the same way, but they don't shrink either, and they do set. Distance in a friendship hardens much as an arrangement does. If a past event still comes between you and someone you want to stay close to, it passes the test above, and it's worth saying while the friendship is still warm enough to take it.

"There's never a good time"

You've been waiting for the right moment. It's worth writing down what the right moment would have to look like, because the list is revealing.

They'd need to be in a good mood, since you don't want to pile on when they're down. They shouldn't be in too good a mood either, since you don't want to ruin a nice evening. You'd need to be calm. There'd have to be time, so it couldn't be a weekday morning or just before bed. The children would have to be out of earshot. It couldn't be just before something important, like a big meeting or a holiday or Christmas, and it couldn't be just after one, when everyone's tired. Nobody should be ill, and work should be going reasonably well for both of you.

Looked at as a list, the conditions can almost never be met together. The right moment is defined so that it doesn't occur. I don't think this is an accident. Part of you has set the entry requirements so high that you can go on waiting with a clear conscience. It doesn't feel like avoiding. You tell yourself you're being considerate about timing.

There's an assumption buried in the waiting that's worth bringing out. It's that a moment exists when the conversation would be easy, and that your job is to find it. No such moment exists. The conversation is about something the other person would rather not hear, and there's no mood in which people enjoy that. A good

moment makes it go somewhat better, but it's never going to be comfortable. If you're holding out for comfortable, you'll wait for ever.

Meanwhile, time that isn't chosen gets chosen for you. The blow-up has its own sense of timing, and it's reliably terrible. It comes when you're most tired and most provoked, because that's when your guard fails. For you that was a car park, after a long family lunch, in front of his mother. For someone else it's the end of a bad day at work, in an open-plan office. Many people manage it on Christmas Eve. When the thing finally comes out on its own, it won't wait for a moment when the children are out of earshot.

So you were never choosing between a good moment and a less good one. You can have a moment you pick, which will be imperfect, or a moment that picks itself, which will be about the worst available.

Picking is easier than you'd think, because a moment only has to clear a low bar. You need half an hour, some privacy, neither of you drunk, exhausted or about to leave the house. That's all. Such moments turn up several times a week.

Better still, don't hunt for the moment at all. Make one. "There's something I'd like to talk about. Could we sit down after the kids are in bed on Thursday?" This has several advantages that I'll come back to in chapter 12. The main one here is that it ends the search. Once Thursday is agreed, the conversation is going to happen, and it's going to happen at a time when you're both sitting down and expecting it.

You might worry that giving notice makes it worse, since they'll fret until Thursday. You can soften that. "It's nothing terrible. It's about how we do weekends, and I'd rather talk about it properly than in passing." A day or two of mild curiosity on their part is a small price. It's far better than an ambush, because notice lets them arrive ready to listen, and an ambush doesn't.

"They must know by now"

By July you were sure that Sam knew. You'd been quiet on Friday evenings for weeks. You'd said "Fine, have fun" in a tone that seemed to you unmistakable. Once you'd remarked, with a little laugh, that it must be nice to have a hobby. It seemed impossible that anyone could miss it. So when he didn't respond, you concluded that he knew and didn't care.

In the car park he said, "You've never said a word about Saturdays," and he meant it.

Thomas Gilovich, Kenneth Savitsky and Victoria Medvec have studied this gap. They call it the illusion of transparency. Across several experiments they found that people overestimate how well others can read their inner states. People who were lying thought their lies were more detectable than they were. People who tasted something disgusting while trying to keep a straight face thought their disgust was far more visible to observers than it was. The researchers' explanation is that your own feelings are so loud to you that it's hard to allow for how faint they are from outside. You begin from your own experience and don't adjust far enough.

Those were laboratory tasks between strangers, and a partner of ten years reads you better than a stranger does. But think about what Sam had to go on. He saw you a bit quiet on Friday evenings, which might have been tiredness. He heard "Fine, have fun", and those are the words of someone who's fine. He heard a joke about hobbies, and perhaps he didn't get it. From inside your head, each of these carried the full weight of four months' resentment. From

where he stood they were ordinary household moments that could be read six ways, and he took the most convenient of them. Most of us do the same, most of the time.

This is the problem with the hint. A hint is designed to be deniable. You send a signal faint enough that if it's challenged you can say you meant nothing by it. A signal that can be denied can also be missed, and if they're the sort to ignore things, it can be ignored. You've chosen a way of communicating that's built to fail, and then you've taken its failure as proof that the other person doesn't care.

There's research on what indirect complaint does to a relationship over time. James McNulty and Michelle Russell followed newly married couples over several years and coded how they talked about their problems. They separated direct negative behaviour, such as openly blaming or demanding, from indirect negative behaviour. The indirect kind included sarcasm, hostile questions such as "What did I tell you?", and claiming to know what the other person really feels. The direct kind had mixed effects, which I'll come to in chapter 8. The indirect kind didn't. It went with steadily lower satisfaction, however large or small the couple's problems were. The sideways complaint seemed to do harm whenever it was used, and it didn't get anything fixed. The researchers' explanation is that an indirect statement leaves it vague what the partner is supposed to do about it. They didn't study sighs and meaningful silences as such, so extending the point to those is my step.

That fits the mechanism. The hint does deliver the bad feeling. Sam could tell on Friday evenings that the air had cooled. What it doesn't deliver is the information. He got the chill and not the

reason. So he had the cost of a complaint without the possibility of doing anything about it, and you had the cost of making one without the possibility of being answered.

This bears on the second grievance I mentioned in chapter 3, the one that goes "and you didn't even notice". It feels like the deeper wound. But it rests on the belief that you'd made yourself clear, and you hadn't. It's hard to hear, and it's also a relief. The person who ignored your obvious distress for four months turns out to be a person who was never told. You may well have a real complaint about Saturdays. The complaint about not noticing is one you can probably put down.

A workable rule is that nothing counts as said until it's been said in words, directly to the person, as a plain statement, at a time when they were listening. A sigh doesn't count, and neither does a remark to their sister. A joke doesn't count, and nor does a pointed silence. If you've done all of those, you still haven't told them.

"It'll go badly"

You've had this conversation dozens of times in your head, and it has never gone well. In the rehearsal you make your point reasonably, and the other person interrupts, gets defensive, brings up something from three years ago, and says the thing you most dread hearing. You lie there composing your reply to it. By the time you fall asleep you're angry with them for things they haven't said.

That's the forecast, and the forecast is the main reason you're waiting. So it matters whether forecasts of this kind are any good.

Emma Levine and Taya Cohen tested this directly. In one set of studies they asked people to be completely honest in every conversation for three days, and asked others to predict what that would be like. In two further experiments, which they registered in advance, people had a specific honest conversation of a kind they'd been avoiding. One involved sharing personal information. The other involved giving someone negative feedback. In each case the researchers compared what people expected with what happened.

People consistently got it wrong in one direction. Being honest turned out to be more pleasant than they'd predicted. It did less harm to their relationships than they'd predicted, and it left them feeling more connected. The researchers traced the error to a single misjudgment. People overestimated how badly the other person would react.

These were volunteers in studies, mostly in the United States, and nobody can promise that your particular conversation will go the way the average did. Some go badly. But the direction of the error is worth taking in, because it's the same one your rehearsals make. You expect more anger, more hurt and more damage than, on average, arrives.

I think there are understandable reasons why the rehearsal runs dark, and this is my interpretation. The rehearsal is written by the part of you that's anxious, and an anxious mind prepares for the worst case because that's what it's for. It casts the other person at their most defensive because that's the version you'd need to be ready for. It also leaves out everything the real person brings, such as their fondness for you and their wish to get on with you. It leaves out their ability to be surprised and then to think. The Sam of your rehearsals is a debating opponent. The real Sam, asked calmly on a Thursday evening whether Saturdays could be shared out differently, is a man who loves you and hadn't realised.

The rehearsal also stops at the wrong place. It plays the first five difficult minutes over and over, and almost never runs on to minute twenty, where the other person has got past their first reaction and started to engage. Many hard conversations do have a rough opening. The other person is caught off guard, feels accused and defends themselves. If you've braced only for that, you may take it for the whole of their answer. It usually isn't. Chapter 13 says more about getting through the first reaction to the second.

I don't want to overstate this. Some people do react badly, and you may know from experience that the person you need to talk to is one of them. If so, you're not mispredicting, and chapter 15 is for

you. But check whether you know it from experience or from rehearsal. You can test it. Think of the last three times you raised something awkward with this person and ask what happened. If you can't think of three times, then your picture of how they react is based largely on imagination.

One last point about forecasts. When you predict how the conversation will go, you compare it with the pleasant evening you'd have if you said nothing. It ought to be compared with the blow-up, since that's where saying nothing leads. Set beside a row in a car park, an awkward half hour on a Thursday evening looks like a good deal.

"I don't want to hurt them"

This reason feels like the most creditable, so it's the hardest to question. You're not avoiding the conversation for your own sake. You're sparing them. They've got enough on their plate, and they'd be upset. It would be unkind.

Some of that is true. The conversation will probably cause them some discomfort. Nobody likes hearing that something they do is a problem for someone they care about. If kindness meant never causing anyone a moment's discomfort, the case would be closed.

But follow what silence does to them, in place of what it spares them.

It takes away their chance to put it right. Sam, told in April, could have done something in April. He might have switched to alternate Saturdays, or taken the children on Sunday mornings, or simply said thank you and meant it. You never gave him the option. For four months he was doing something that hurt you and didn't know it, and I doubt he'd have chosen that. Most people, asked whether they'd want to be told that something they were doing was hurting their partner, would say yes, and would be dismayed to learn they'd been left in the dark to protect their feelings.

It lets them walk further into trouble. This is clearest at work. A manager who can't bring themselves to tell someone that their reports aren't good enough isn't being kind. The person carries on, the problem grows, and it ends in a formal process that might

never have been needed. A friend who watches you make a serious mistake and says nothing because it's awkward hasn't been much of a friend.

It changes how you treat them. You can't carry a grievance for months and be fully warm with the person it's about. They get a cooler, more guarded version of you, and they don't know why. That's a kind of hurt too. It's more diffuse than the conversation would have been, and it lasts a great deal longer.

And it guarantees that when they do hear it, they hear it in its worst form. The choice was never between hurting them and not hurting them. It was between a small, clear hurt now, delivered with care, and a larger one later, delivered in anger and with a backlog attached.

Try turning it round. Suppose a friend of yours had been quietly bothered by something you do, for half a year. Perhaps you always arrive late, or you talk over them. They said nothing. They grew a little distant, and then one day it all came out. Would you feel they'd been kind to you? Most people say they'd have wanted to know at the start. They'd have been a bit embarrassed, and then they'd have fixed it. When the secret does come out, they find the months of silence harder to forgive than the complaint.

It's worth being honest about whose discomfort is really being avoided. Some of it is theirs, but a good deal of it is yours. You don't want to watch their face fall, or to be the cause of a bad evening, or to be the person who said the awkward thing. That's entirely

human, and there's no shame in it. But it means that the kindness story is doing some work for you. It turns a reluctance that's mostly about your own comfort into a virtue.

Nickola Overall and James McNulty reviewed the research on how couples communicate during conflict. One of their conclusions runs against common advice. Warm, soft, validating communication is helpful when problems are minor or can't be changed. When a serious problem needs to change, the same softness can be harmful, because the problem doesn't get addressed. In their review, being pleasant wasn't the same as being kind. Sometimes kindness means saying something the other person would rather not hear, clearly enough that they can act on it.

Tact still matters, and chapter 12 is mostly about it. Saying the thing kindly is a skill, and you should use it. My point is only that kindness is no argument for staying silent.

"I'd rather keep the peace"

Nobody wants to live or work in a state of conflict. If you grew up in a house where there was shouting, you may have promised yourself that your own home would be calm. Letting things go, biting your tongue and not making a fuss can feel like the way you keep that promise.

So it's worth looking closely at the peace that silence buys. I'd call it quiet, and I think quiet and peace are different things.

Peace, in a household or a team, means that people are at ease with each other. Problems come up and get dealt with, nobody's keeping score, and you can say what you think without bracing for it.

Quiet means only that nothing's being said. Under the quiet there can be a good deal going on. You're keeping a private tally of Saturdays. You're slightly cooler than you used to be. You've withdrawn a little, in ways you may not have noticed, by starting fewer conversations and sharing less and going to bed at different times. The other person senses the withdrawal and responds to it, perhaps by withdrawing too, perhaps by getting irritable. Nothing is said about that either. A home like that is quiet, and I wouldn't call it peaceful.

Researchers who study couples have a name for one common shape this takes. They call it demand and withdraw. One partner presses for change by criticising or nagging, and the other pulls back, goes silent or leaves the room. Paul Schrodt, Paul Witt and Jenna Shimkowski pooled 74 studies of this pattern, with more

than fourteen thousand participants. It was reliably associated with worse outcomes. The association was strongest for the quality of the relationship and the quality of communication, and it was present, though weaker, for people's own wellbeing. It held whichever partner did the demanding and whichever did the withdrawing.

These are correlations, and unhappy couples may fall into the pattern as much as the pattern makes them unhappy. But notice that silence is half of it. Going quiet to keep the peace doesn't take you out of the conflict. It gives you one of the two roles in it. Often the same person plays both over time. They withdraw for months and then demand all at once in a car park.

I promised to return to McNulty and Russell's finding about direct communication. In their newlywed studies, openly negative behaviour, such as blaming or making demands, was bad for couples whose problems were minor. It made things worse than they needed to be. But for couples facing serious problems, the same direct behaviour went with more stable satisfaction over the years. The reason seemed to be that the problems themselves got better. The directness was unpleasant in the moment, and it got the problem solved, which the indirect kind never did.

I'm not recommending blame, and you can be direct without it, as chapter 12 will show. What I'd take from the finding is narrower. A relationship can stand a good deal of honest discomfort if it leads to problems being solved. A relationship stands unsolved problems much less well, however pleasant the surface. Couples who never argue aren't necessarily doing well. Sometimes one of them has stopped saying things.

The same holds in a team, or a friendship, or a shared flat. You can share a flat in perfect quiet with someone you've come to dislike over their washing-up. The quiet lasts until one of you moves out, and then you tell other people that it just didn't work.

If peace is what you want, and it's a good thing to want, then the conversation is a better way to get it than silence is. It'll cost you half an hour of discomfort. The quiet was costing you some closeness every week it went on.

What waiting does to the conversation

The subtitle of this book says that the conversation you put off becomes a worse one. This chapter sets out how. It's the centre of the argument, and most of it is my own reasoning, with one study.

Compare the two conversations you could have had about Saturdays.

The April conversation would have gone something like this. "Can I talk to you about Saturdays? I'm glad you've found the cycling, and I can see it's good for you. I'm finding it hard having the kids on my own every week, though. Could we work out something that gives me some time as well?" It concerns one thing, which is recent. There's no history to argue over. It comes with a request he could say yes to. You're not angry yet, only a bit tired, so your voice is ordinary. He's surprised, but he isn't under attack, and there's nothing for him to defend.

The August conversation began with "you're never here", and everything about it was different.

It was about too much. Four months of Saturdays had gathered other things to them. There was the holiday, and his mother, and the remark at Christmas. When a grievance has waited a long time it attracts others, because a mind that's been keeping score on one thing starts keeping score in general. You couldn't say what you wanted because by then you wanted a dozen things. He couldn't respond to any of them because they came all at once.

It was in the wrong words. "Never", "always", "everything" and "every single" are the vocabulary of stored-up anger. They're also false, and the other person knows they're false, so the conversation becomes a dispute about accuracy. "I'm not never here. I was here all day Sunday." Now you're arguing about Sunday.

It was at the wrong time and in the wrong place, as chapter 4 described, because a blow-up chooses its own.

It came as an ambush. Sam had no warning and no time to think. A person who's ambushed defends himself, and you shouldn't read that as a flaw in his character. It's what nearly everyone does when attacked without warning in front of their mother.

There's evidence that the opening of a difficult conversation matters a great deal. Sybil Carrère and John Gottman recorded 124 newly married couples discussing a point of conflict for fifteen minutes. They coded the emotional tone minute by minute. Then they followed the couples for six years. The tone of the first three minutes alone was enough to predict, better than chance, which couples would later divorce. Conversations that began harshly tended to stay harsh, and couples who habitually began that way did worse. I'd add a caution from general knowledge. Predictions of this kind have been criticised as less impressive than they sound, since a pattern fitted to one group of couples may not predict as well in another. But the narrower point is hard to doubt. A conversation that starts with an accusation rarely recovers inside the same half hour.

A conversation that's been put off for months nearly always starts harshly. By the time it happens you're too angry to open gently, and you didn't choose the opening anyway.

Waiting also adds one more subject to the conversation, which is the waiting itself. "Why didn't you say something?" is a fair question, and it has no good answer. If you've been unhappy since April and said nothing, the other person learns two uncomfortable things at once. They learn about the problem, and they learn that you can be unhappy for four months while telling them you're fine. The second can disturb them more than the first. They start to wonder what else you're not saying, and whether "fine" means fine.

The same thing happens outside marriages. Take a manager whose team member, Callum, has been handing in work late since January. In January the conversation would have been two minutes at his desk. "The last two reports were a few days late. Is something getting in the way?" The manager finds it awkward and lets it go. By June there have been nine late reports, and two colleagues have complained. The manager is irritated every time Callum speaks. The conversation that finally happens is a formal one with HR in the room, and the first thing Callum says is, "Nobody ever told me it was a problem." As far as he knew, it wasn't. In January he'd have had an easy fix available. By June there's a file on him, and he's resentful, and he thinks the manager doesn't play straight with him. That's an invented example, but people who work in offices will have seen it happen.

Finally, waiting weakens your position, which is the opposite of what people expect. It's natural to think that a longer record of patient suffering gives you more moral authority. In practice it

works the other way. In April your request was plainly reasonable. After the car park, your original point, which was just as reasonable as it had been in April, has been buried under the way it came out. Now the evening is about your outburst. You may even end up apologising, and the Saturdays may go undiscussed for another month, because nobody wants to go back there.

None of this means that a conversation put off too long can't be rescued. It can, and chapter 15 covers how. But the pattern is dependable enough that I'll state it as a rule of thumb. The conversation is rarely easier than it is this week, because the subject is as small and your feelings as mild as they're going to be. Every week you wait, the subject grows and your feelings harden a little more.

What waiting does to you

So far I've looked at what happens to the conversation and to the other person. This chapter is about the cost to you in the meantime. For some people it's the largest item of all.

An unsaid thing takes up room. You know this from the rehearsals. They arrive in the shower, on the drive to work and at night. Each one runs for a few minutes and leaves you slightly stirred up, as if you'd really had the argument. Over four months that's a lot of arguments. None of them happened, and you've still paid for them in mood and attention.

There's research on why unfinished business behaves this way. E.J. Masicampo and Roy Baumeister ran a series of studies on goals that people had left unfulfilled. Those who'd been reminded of an important task they hadn't done had more intrusive thoughts about it while trying to read something unrelated, and they did worse on a later task. The interesting part is what stopped the intrusions. The people who were freed from them hadn't finished the task. They'd made a specific plan for when and how they'd do it. Once a plan existed, the mind seemed willing to stop nagging.

Those were laboratory tasks and not strained marriages, so the carry-over is my step. But it matches what people commonly report. Once they've said, "Can we talk on Thursday?", much of the churning stops, before the conversation has even happened. The rehearsals had been your mind's way of keeping an open item in view. Once it has a date, your mind can leave it alone until then.

The second cost is to your enjoyment of the person. It's hard to delight in someone you're quietly angry with. You stop noticing what's good about them, because your attention is on the file. Small things they do start to look like more evidence. Sam leaves his cycling shoes in the hall and it isn't just shoes any more. People who carry an unsaid thing for long enough often find they've fallen out of fondness for the other person, and they take that to be a fact about the relationship. Often it's a fact about the file. When the thing is said and dealt with, a surprising amount of the fondness comes back.

The third is the effort of acting normal. You're running two versions of yourself. One says "Fine, have fun", and the other keeps a record. Keeping them apart takes some effort every day, and it makes you a little false with someone you'd like to be straight with. Most people find that tiring in a way they can't quite place.

The fourth is what it does to your view of yourself. Each time you resolve to say it and don't, you add a little to the belief that you're someone who can't. That belief then makes the next conversation harder to start. The habit feeds on its own record. Every hard conversation you do have goes on the record too, and counts the other way.

The last is that it spreads. The friend you haven't spoken to about the money becomes someone you see less. The colleague you haven't spoken to about the credit for the project becomes someone you avoid at lunch. You adjust your life around the unsaid thing, and the adjustments cost you more than the

conversation would have. Some people lose friendships this way without a cross word ever being exchanged. They stop ringing, and nobody ever learns the reason.

I said in the preface that if this has been affecting your sleep and mood for weeks, it's worth telling a GP. I'll repeat that here. Most people who are carrying an unsaid thing are simply carrying an unsaid thing, and saying it is the cure. But prolonged poor sleep and low mood deserve attention in their own right, whatever's behind them.

Add these up and compare them with what the conversation costs. You'd have half an hour of real discomfort, and perhaps a difficult evening, and a few days of things being slightly tender between you. That's a real cost, and I won't pretend it's nothing. But you pay it once, and the costs of waiting are paid every day.

"I'll put it in a message"

Once you've accepted that the thing has to be said, the next temptation is to write it instead. You could send a long text, an email or a letter left on the kitchen table. It seems to solve everything. You get to choose your words and say it all without being interrupted, and you don't have to watch their face.

I understand the appeal, and I'd steer you away from it for anything that matters. There are three reasons.

The first is tone. Justin Kruger, Nicholas Epley and colleagues ran five experiments on how well people convey tone in email. Senders wrote messages with a particular tone in mind, such as sarcasm or humour, and predicted how well readers would pick it up. They were consistently overconfident. The writer hears their own voice as they type, with all its warmth and emphasis, and can't easily imagine the message without it. The reader gets bare words. In a difficult message, the bare words are nearly always read as colder and angrier than they were meant. The sentence you wrote gently gets read in the voice the reader fears.

The second is that a message can't adjust. Face to face, you see within two sentences that they've misunderstood, or that they're hurt, or that they already knew. You change course, and soften, and clear up the misreading before it sets. A message delivers all eight paragraphs regardless, including the six that turned out to be unnecessary and the one they'll reread forty times.

The third is what happens next. After a message there's a silence, which you spend imagining their reaction. Then comes a reply, which has been composed with as much care and as little tone as yours was. The two of you can exchange careful documents for days, each one slightly more hurt than the last, without ever having the conversation. A message also lasts. It can be reread, quoted back to you, and shown to other people.

So for anything important, say it aloud. In person is best. A phone or video call is next best, and it's the sensible choice when you live far apart.

Writing does have two good uses, and I'd encourage both.

One is to book the conversation. "There's something I'd like to talk about, nothing terrible. Are you free Thursday evening?" A message is ideal for this. It's short, its tone is hard to mistake, and it means the other person doesn't arrive unprepared.

The other is to prepare. Write the whole thing out, as long and as angry as you like, in a document nobody will see. It clears your head and shows you what you really think. Reading it back the next day also helps you find the one thing in it that matters, which the next chapter will need. After that, don't send it.

There are exceptions, and they're mostly about safety and power. If you're dealing with someone who twists what was said, or with a formal matter at work where a record will be needed, then writing protects you, and you should use it. If speaking face to face doesn't feel safe, the preface and chapter 15 apply. And some people do express themselves far better on paper. If that's you, consider

writing your first two sentences and reading them aloud. It's allowed. "I've written down what I want to say because I wanted to get it right." People are usually touched by that.

The first two sentences

The hardest part of a difficult conversation is the first ten seconds. People who dread these conversations usually aren't short of things to say. What they lack is a way to begin. So the most useful preparation is also the smallest. Write your first two sentences in advance, and learn them.

The first sentence says what you've noticed. The second says what you'd like. Here's how to build each.

What you've noticed. Make it one thing. Make it specific and recent, and describe it the way a camera would have recorded it. "For the last few months you've been out cycling every Saturday until about two, and I've had the kids on my own." Sam can't really dispute that, because it's simply what's been happening. Compare "you're never here", which he can dispute at once and will.

To get there you have to choose. If the thing has been waiting a long time, you'll have a list, and everything on it will want to come. Leave the list at home. Pick the one item that would make the most difference if it changed, and raise only that. The other items will either turn out not to matter once the main one is dealt with, or they can have their own conversation another week. A conversation about one thing can succeed. A conversation about six things can't, because the other person doesn't know which one to answer.

Add how it affects you, stated as your own experience. "I'm finding it hard, and I've started to feel resentful, which I don't want." Shane Rogers, Jill Howieson and Casey Neame tested opening statements for conflict conversations. They asked people to rate how defensive each would make them. Statements framed around "I" were rated as less hostile than those framed around "you". The best rated of all were those that also showed some understanding of the other person's position. This was a study of ratings of hypothetical statements and not of real conversations. It agrees with common sense, though. "You're selfish" is an accusation about their character, and they'll fight it. "I'm struggling" is a report about you, and there isn't much in it for them to fight.

What you'd like. People often leave this half out. A complaint with no request leaves the other person with nothing to do except feel bad or defend themselves. If you make a request, there's something they can say yes to. "I'd like us to work out a way for me to get some time too. Could you do alternate Saturdays, or could I have Sunday mornings?" Make it concrete and possible. It should concern the future and not the past, since they can't change April.

If you don't know what you want, which is common, then say that. "I don't know what the answer is, but I'd like us to find one together." That's a request too, and a good one.

If the thing has waited a long time, add one more sentence at the start and own the delay. "I should have raised this months ago, and that's on me." It answers "Why didn't you say?" before it's asked, and it means you've taken some of the blame yourself before asking them to take any. It costs you nothing, since it's true.

Then there's the setting. As chapter 4 suggested, book the conversation and don't spring it. Choose somewhere private where you can both sit. Some people find it easier side by side, on a walk or in the car, where you don't have to look at each other. It's best if neither of you is hungry, drunk or exhausted. Allow half an hour, and don't start if one of you has to leave in ten minutes.

So the whole opening, for Sam, might be this. "Thanks for making time. I should have raised this months ago, and that's on me. For the last few months you've been cycling every Saturday until about two and I've had the kids on my own, and I'm finding it hard. I'd like us to work out a way for me to get some time as well."

That takes about twenty seconds. Write yours out, and say it aloud a few times on your own, until the words are familiar in your mouth. It will feel stilted, but when the moment comes and your heart is going, you'll be glad to have sentences that know their own way out. After those sentences you won't need a script, because you'll be in a conversation.

After the first two sentences

You've said your two sentences. What happens next isn't in your control, but it's more predictable than you'd think, and a few things make it go better.

Stop talking. Having said the hard thing, you'll want to keep going. You'll want to explain and justify and soften it, and add examples. Resist that. Say the two sentences and then let there be a silence. The other person needs a moment to take in what they've heard. If you fill the gap, you'll usually fill it with items from the list.

Expect the first reaction, and wait for the second. Most people, told something unwelcome, respond first with some form of defence. "That's not fair." "You never said." "What about your Thursdays?" That first reaction comes from surprise and hurt, and it isn't usually their considered view. Your rehearsals stopped here and took this for the answer. If you can let it go by without striking back, a second reaction generally follows within a few minutes, and it's the one that matters. "I hadn't realised. I suppose it has been every week." The whole skill of this part is not to fight the first reaction. You can acknowledge it. "I know, I should have said sooner." Then wait.

Listen to their side, which you haven't heard. For all your rehearsing, you know only half of this. Sam may tell you that the cycling is the one thing keeping him steady through a bad year at work. He may say he thought you liked having the house to yourselves, or that he's been feeling shut out at home and the club is where he feels welcome. You may not agree with any of it. It's

still information you lacked, and some of it may change what you want. Ask questions, and ask because you want the answers. "What does the club give you?" "What did you think I felt about it?" The better you understand his side, the better the arrangement you'll reach.

Stay on the one thing. At some point the conversation will try to widen. They'll raise something about you, or you'll be tempted to bring in the second item on your list. If what they raise is fair, say so, and offer to come back to it. "That's fair, and I'd like to talk about it. Can we finish Saturdays first?" If you feel yourself reaching for the list, don't. One thing settled is worth more than six things aired.

Look for one next step. A complete solution is too much to ask of half an hour. "Let's try alternate Saturdays for a month and see" is a good outcome. It's small and specific, and it has a review date. If the conversation ends with both of you knowing what happens next, it has worked, even if the next step is modest.

End it. When you have a next step, or when you've both said what you have to say, stop. Thank them. "Thanks for hearing that. I feel better for having said it." Then do something ordinary together, such as putting the kettle on or watching something. People often spoil a good conversation by going round it a second and third time. It doesn't all have to be resolved tonight.

Sometimes it goes badly in spite of everything. They may get angry and stay angry, or walk out, or refuse to discuss it. Here's what to do.

If the temperature is rising and neither of you is listening, call a pause. "I don't want this to turn into a row. Can we stop and come back to it tomorrow evening?" Give the pause an end date, since that's what makes it different from walking away. And do come back to it.

If they need time, give it. Some people can't think on the spot and do their real responding a day or two later. A conversation that seemed to fail on Thursday sometimes produces a changed arrangement by Sunday with no further discussion. It's worth waiting a few days before judging the result.

If they flatly refuse to engage, you've still gained something. You've said it. They know, the question of whether they know is closed, and you're no longer holding it on your own. You've also learned something important about how this person deals with difficulty, which you needed to know. What you do with that is a separate decision, and at least you'll be making it on real information and not on rehearsals.

Whatever happens, a conversation that went badly isn't proof that you shouldn't have spoken. The blow-up would have gone worse. Overall and McNulty's review, which I mentioned in chapter 7, concluded that direct communication works best when the problem is serious and the other person is able to change. It can backfire when the other person is too insecure or defensive to respond. You can't always know in advance which kind of person you're talking to. With most people in most relationships, you're talking to someone who'd rather know.

The decision

This chapter asks you to decide something. It comes late because at the start it would have sounded like "just be braver", which is no help to anyone. By now you've seen that waiting doesn't keep the conversation on a shelf. You've seen that your hints haven't been received, and that your forecast is darker than the facts support. You've seen that silence isn't the kindness it seemed to be. You also have a way to begin. So here's the decision.

When I notice I'm carrying something that needs saying, I say it within the week.

Here's what it involves.

Name it. Write the thing in one sentence, as you did at the end of chapter 1. If you can't get it into one sentence, you have a list, and you need to choose the one item that matters most.

Test it. Ask the three questions from chapter 3. Is it a pattern, is anything about to change by itself, and am I still rehearsing it? If it fails the test, let it go, and mean it. If it passes, it goes in the diary.

Book it. Ask the person for a time within seven days. "There's something I'd like to talk about. Are you free Thursday evening?" The conversation becomes real once you've sent that message. Sending it is usually the hardest step, and it takes about ten seconds.

Write the first two sentences. Write down what you've noticed and what you'd like, as in chapter 12, with an apology for the delay if there's been one. Say them aloud a few times.

Say them, then stop and listen. As in chapter 13. Stay on the one thing and look for one next step, and end the conversation when you have it.

Same day for small things. For small matters the week is too long. If a colleague interrupts you in a meeting and it bothers you, mention it that afternoon, lightly. "Could I finish my point next time? I lost my thread." Small things said early stay small. Once this is habitual, you'll find you rarely have a big conversation to book, because nothing's had time to grow.

Plans of the "when this, then that" kind make a decision like this much more likely to survive a busy week. Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran pooled 94 tests of such plans and found that they made people a good deal more likely to follow through. Here are three, which you can adapt.

When I catch myself rehearsing a conversation, then I'll write the thing in one sentence and ask for a time.

When I notice I'm hinting, then I'll either say it plainly or drop it.

When I hear myself think "this isn't a good time", then I'll propose a time within the week.

The first plan turns the rehearsal round. Until now it's taken the place of the conversation. From here on it works as a reminder that a conversation is due. The second plan does the same for the hint,

which becomes your own signal that something hasn't been said.

If you have a backlog, and most people who pick up this book do, don't try to clear it in a week. Put the unsaid things in order, by how much each is costing you and how much the relationship matters. Take the first one only. Book it and have it. Then let a week or two pass before the next. You'll find that the second is easier than the first, and that some items further down have dissolved, because they were attached to the first.

Here's what to expect, and I'll be careful, because I can't promise you an outcome. The first conversation will be uncomfortable for you, mostly in the hour beforehand. It'll probably go better than your rehearsals said it would, though probably not perfectly. Afterwards you're likely to feel lighter than the result alone would account for, because the carrying has stopped. Over a few months I'd expect fewer blow-ups, since less will be stored up. I'd expect more ease with the people close to you, and I'd expect them to say more to you, because people tend to be straight with someone who's straight with them. I can't promise that every conversation will get you what you asked for. Some people will say no, and chapter 15 looks at that. What will change is that you'll know where you stand with people, and they'll know where they stand with you.

Bosses, parents and people who frighten you

The method is simple. Some situations aren't, and I should be plain about them.

When they have power over you. Raising something with a boss carries risks that raising it with a friend doesn't. The interviews in chapter 2 found that fear of being labelled was the commonest reason for silence at work, and sometimes that fear is well founded. The method still applies, with adjustments. Be even more specific and even more focused on the future. Frame it around the work. "I'd like to talk about how the on-call rota is being shared out. I've done five of the last eight weekends, and I'd like to get to something more even." Acas, the workplace advice service, says that when an employee has a problem at work it's usually a good idea to raise it informally first, and that an employer should respond even when it's raised that way. If the informal route fails, or the matter is serious, there are formal routes, and Acas and your union, if you have one, can advise. Keep a note of what you raised and when.

When you have the power. If you manage people, the conversation you're putting off is probably about someone's performance or behaviour. Everything in chapter 7 applies with extra force. The person can't fix what they haven't been told, and the longer you wait, the more likely it ends in a formal process that feels to them like an ambush. Tell them early and specifically, and tell them in private.

Parents. Conversations with parents carry decades of habit. You may find you're forty-five and still can't tell your mother that you won't be coming for the whole of Christmas. Lower your ambition for the outcome and keep your request small and concrete. You probably won't change how your father is. You can tell him that you'd like him to stop commenting on your weight, and that you'll change the subject when he does. With parents it's often enough to have said it once, clearly, and then to act consistently.

Someone who explodes. Some people respond to any criticism with rage. If you know this from experience and not from rehearsal, plan for it. Choose a setting where you can leave. Say your two sentences. If the explosion comes, don't argue with it. "I can see you're angry. I'll leave it there for now, and I'd like to come back to it when we're both calmer." Then go. You've said it, which was the task. If explosions are the rule, and you find yourself arranging your life to avoid setting them off, read the next paragraph.

If you're afraid of them. I said in the preface that this book assumes the other person is safe to talk to. If you're holding back because you fear being hurt, threatened or punished, or because you've learned that speaking up gets you hurt, that isn't avoidance. Staying quiet may be how you've kept yourself safe. A book about speaking up is the wrong tool for that. The NHS lists being afraid of your partner, and changing your behaviour because you're afraid of what they might do, among the signs of an abusive relationship. The freephone National Domestic Abuse Helpline is open day and night on 0808 2000 247, and the NHS page on domestic abuse lists

other services, including for men. They can help you think about what's safe. Please talk to them before you try anything in this book with that person.

When the answer is no. Sometimes you'll say it well and they'll hear you and decline. Sam might say that Saturdays matter too much to him to give up. Then you have a real disagreement, and it's out in the open, which is better than a hidden one. You can negotiate, look for something else that would meet your need, get help from a counsellor, or decide what you're prepared to live with. None of those was available while the thing was unsaid.

When it's too late for the early version. If the blow-up has already happened, go back. Wait a day, then book a conversation in the ordinary way. "I'm sorry for how that came out on Sunday. The way I said it was wrong, but there's a real thing underneath, and I'd like to talk about it properly. Could we sit down on Thursday?" Apologise for the way you said it and keep hold of what you were saying. Then use your two sentences as if for the first time.

When the person is no longer there. Some unsaid things are for people who've died or gone out of reach. This book's method can't help with those, and I won't pretend it can. Some people find it helps to write the letter anyway, or to say it to someone who knew them. If it's weighing on you heavily, it's a good thing to take to a counsellor. In England you can refer yourself to NHS talking therapies without seeing a GP first.

Weeks you can't do it. There'll be times when you book nothing, the old reasons seem sound again, and a month goes by. It happens to everyone who tries to change a long habit, and it doesn't undo

what you've learned. When you notice, do the smallest version.

Write the thing in one sentence and send the message asking for a time. That takes two minutes, and once a time is agreed, the conversation will happen.

The car park again

Here's a scene from some months later. It's an example of how things might go, and I'm not promising it.

It's a Tuesday in February. Over the past few weeks Sam has started taking work calls during supper. It's happened four or five times now. You've noticed yourself getting quiet at the table, and last night in bed you caught yourself composing a speech about it, with Sam's part written for him.

You recognise the rehearsal for what it is. In the morning you write one sentence on the back of an envelope. "Sam's been taking work calls during supper and I'd like him to stop." You ask yourself the three questions. It's a pattern, nothing's about to change, and you're rehearsing. So it passes. You text him at lunchtime. "Nothing terrible, but there's something small I'd like to talk about. After the kids are down tonight?" He replies, "Course. Should I be worried?" You write back, "No. Five minutes."

At half past eight you sit down with him. Your heart's going a bit, which still surprises you. "Thanks. It's a small thing. The last few weeks you've taken work calls during supper, four or five times, and I find it spoils the one bit of the day we're all together. I'd like supper to be phones away unless it's a real emergency."

He begins to say that it's been a mad month and the calls were important. You say nothing and wait. Then he says, "No, you're right. I hadn't clocked how often. I'll tell them I'm not free between

six and seven." He adds that he'd like you not to read the news on your phone at breakfast, if you're making rules, and you laugh and agree that's fair.

It takes seven minutes, and then you watch something together.

Compare it with the car park. It concerned one thing, a few weeks old. You raised it at a time you'd both chosen, in words you'd picked, and you made a request he could say yes to. He wasn't ambushed, so he didn't have to defend himself for long. You hadn't stored anything up. And because you raised yours, he felt able to raise his.

Saturdays, as it happens, got sorted out back in September, after a second and much better conversation that began with your apology for the first. He does alternate weeks now, and you have Sunday mornings. It turned out that he'd have agreed to that in April.

Things won't always be this tidy. Some conversations will go badly, and some people will say no. There'll be things you carry for longer than a week, because you're tired or frightened or it's Christmas. But you've learned that what you dread is mostly the first ten seconds, and that the first ten seconds can be written down in advance. The longer you leave the thing unsaid, the bigger it gets.

If you do one thing after closing this book, write the thing in one sentence, and send the person a message asking for half an hour this week.

Notes

This book gives general information. It isn't relationship counselling, legal advice or medical advice, and it's no substitute for a professional who knows your situation. NHS and Acas guidance is quoted as I found it in September 2026 and applies to England, or to Great Britain in the case of Acas.

I've kept sources out of the chapters where I could so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Unless I say otherwise, I read the published summary of each paper and not the full text. I checked each paper for a retraction or correction notice in September 2026 and found none. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes chapters 1, 3, 4, 12 apart from one study, 13 apart from one review, 14 apart from one study, and 16. Sam, the Saturdays and every other example are invented for illustration.

Before you start. The two questions about fear are from the NHS page "Getting help for domestic violence and abuse", which also gives the helpline number. The helpline named is described there as being for women, and the same page lists services for men and for other groups.

Chapter 2. Rosen and Tesser, "On reluctance to communicate undesirable information: the MUM effect", *Sociometry* 33, 1970, beginning on page 253. I couldn't obtain the paper or a summary of it. Dibble and Levine, "Breaking good and bad news: direction of the MUM effect and senders' cognitive representations of news valence", *Communication Research* 37, 2010, pages 703 to 722.

There were 114 participants. Milliken, Morrison and Hewlin, "An exploratory study of employee silence: issues that employees don't communicate upward and why", *Journal of Management Studies* 40, 2003, pages 1453 to 1476. The list of reasons for waiting is mine, as is the distinction between deciding not to raise something and putting it off.

Chapter 5. Gilovich, Savitsky and Medvec, "The illusion of transparency: biased assessments of others' ability to read one's emotional states", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75, 1998, pages 332 to 346. None of the experiments involved couples or grievances, and applying the idea to hints is my step. McNulty and Russell, "When 'negative' behaviors are positive: a contextual analysis of the long-term effects of problem-solving behaviors on changes in relationship satisfaction", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 98, 2010, pages 587 to 604. I read the full text. There were 72 newlywed couples in one study and 135 in the other, all in the United States. Indirect negative behaviour was coded as presumptive remarks about the partner's feelings, hostile questions, avoiding responsibility and sarcasm. Sighs and silences weren't coded, and the chapter says so.

Chapter 6. Levine and Cohen, "You can handle the truth: mispredicting the consequences of honest communication", *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 147, 2018, pages 1400 to 1429. That the participants were mostly in the United States is my assumption from the authors' institutions and isn't stated in the summary. The account of why rehearsals run dark is my interpretation.

Chapter 7. Overall and McNulty, "What type of communication during conflict is beneficial for intimate relationships?", *Current Opinion in Psychology* 13, 2017, pages 1 to 5. It's a short review. The rest of the chapter is my own argument.

Chapter 8. Schrodtt, Witt and Shimkowski, "A meta-analytical review of the demand/withdraw pattern of interaction and its associations with individual, relational, and communicative outcomes", *Communication Monographs* 81, 2014, pages 28 to 58. There were 74 studies and 14,255 participants. The overall correlation was .36, with .42 for relational outcomes and .25 for wellbeing. McNulty and Russell as above. The distinction between peace and quiet is mine.

Chapter 9. Carrère and Gottman, "Predicting divorce among newlyweds from the first three minutes of a marital conflict discussion", *Family Process* 38, 1999, pages 293 to 301. There were 124 couples followed for six years. My caution about prediction studies of this kind is from general knowledge of criticisms made of them, and I haven't reviewed those criticisms for this book.

Chapter 10. Masicampo and Baumeister, "Consider it done! Plan making can eliminate the cognitive effects of unfulfilled goals", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101, 2011, pages 667 to 683. The tasks were laboratory tasks. That booking a conversation quiets the rehearsals is my extension and hasn't been tested.

Chapter 11. Kruger, Epley, Parker and Ng, "Egocentrism over e-mail: can we communicate as well as we think?", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 89, 2005, pages 925 to 936. The

studies concerned tone in ordinary messages and not difficult conversations. That difficult messages are read as colder than intended is my inference.

Chapter 12. Rogers, Howieson and Neame, "I understand you feel that way, but I feel this way: the benefits of I-language and communicating perspective during conflict", PeerJ 6, 2018, article e4831. Participants rated hypothetical statements. The two-sentence opening is my own and hasn't been tested.

Chapter 13. Overall and McNulty as above.

Chapter 14. Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", Advances in Experimental Social Psychology 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. The rule and its parts haven't been tested together, and what I say to expect is my expectation and not a finding.

Chapter 15. The Acas advice is from its page "Grievance procedure step by step". The signs of an abusive relationship and the helpline are from the NHS page named above. Self-referral is from the NHS page "NHS talking therapies for anxiety and depression".