

## EFT &amp; ACT · THE STORIES WE TELL

# THE STORY YOU'RE TELLING

When goodwill is low, couples stop giving each other the benefit of the doubt and start reading ordinary moments through old stories: “they’re about to nitpick me,” or “they’re going to drop the ball.” The story runs ahead of the facts, and it usually turns out to be a cover for a softer fear. This is an EFT- and ACT-informed guide to catching the story, reaching for what’s underneath, and making room for what you can’t control.





## THE STORY RUNS AHEAD OF THE FACTS

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### HOW A STORY HARDENS

- Your partner goes quiet, or checks your work, or asks a pointed question. On its own, the moment is ambiguous.
- Your mind fills the gap fast, and under stress it fills it with the worst reading: “here comes the criticism,” or “they’ve dropped the ball again.”
- Researchers who study couples call this a distress-maintaining attribution: taking one moment as proof of a stable flaw in your partner rather than a one-off.
- The story then shapes what you do next, and what you do next often pulls the very thing you feared out of your partner. The story confirms itself.

## TWO STORIES, ONE LOOP

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### THE STORIES IN THIS COUPLE

- One of you tells a story like this: “if I don’t stay on top of it, it won’t get done right and I’ll be left holding the mess.” So you watch, correct, and stay ready to catch the drop.
- The other tells a story like this: “nothing I do will be good enough, they’re scanning for what’s wrong.” So you brace, defend, or pull back before the critique can land.
- Each move triggers the other’s story. The watching feels like judgment, so the second partner withdraws. The withdrawing looks like not caring, so the first partner watches harder. Around it goes.



## UNDERNEATH THE STORY IS A FEAR

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In EFT, the story is the surface, and underneath it sits a more vulnerable feeling: what Sue Johnson calls a raw spot, an old attachment fear. The behavior that drives your partner up the wall is a way of guarding that raw spot. When you can feel the fear under your own story, the story loosens.

### THE ONE WHO WATCHES AND CORRECTS

- The story: they won't be prepared, they'll drop the ball, I'll have to fix it.
- The fear underneath: I can't fully relax or count on being taken care of, and if I let go, it falls apart and I'm left carrying the fallout by myself. In Sue Johnson's EFT, that maps to the raw spots she calls the universal ones, deprivation and abandonment.
- The protection: staying on top of everything is how you try to feel safe. It reads to your partner as criticism, and it starts in you as fear.

### THE ONE WHO BRACES AND PULLS BACK

- The story: they're looking for what's wrong, nothing I do will measure up.
- The fear underneath: I'm not enough for you, and I'll keep failing to be the person you need. In EFT terms, a judgment raw spot: the fear of being weighed and found wanting.
- The protection: bracing, defending, or going quiet is how you guard against one more moment of falling short. It reads to your partner as not caring, and it starts in you as fear.

Neither fear is unreasonable, and neither partner is the enemy here. What keeps it going is the cycle itself, fed by two people each guarding a tender spot the other can't see.

## HOW TO GIVE THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT

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Giving the benefit of the doubt is holding your story loosely long enough to check it, on the chance that your partner's fear rather than their character is driving the moment. It does not require pretending the annoying thing didn't happen.

- 1 Catch the story**  
Notice the moment you've already decided what your partner's behavior means. "Here we go, they're criticizing me" is a story, not a fact yet.
- 2 Separate the story from what you saw**  
What happened: they asked about the bill. The story you added: they think I'm irresponsible. Pull the two apart and you get room to move instead of reacting to your own conclusion.
- 3 Reach for a more generous reading**  
If you assumed the best instead of the worst, what else could this mean? Maybe they're anxious about money, not judging you. Reaching for the generous reading keeps you from convicting your partner on a story you haven't checked.
- 4 Ask instead of assume**  
The fastest way out of a story is a real question: "when you asked about the bill, what was going on for you?" Then believe the answer, at least as much as you believed your story.
- 5 Lead with the fear, not the story**  
Instead of the hard story ("you're always on me"), try the soft truth under it ("when you check my work, I start to feel like I can't get anything right, and that hurts"). The soft version is the one your partner can actually respond to.



## WHAT YOU CAN'T CONTROL

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Even after you check the story, one hard truth stays: you cannot control how your partner feels, and you cannot guarantee you will always be enough for them. In ACT with Love, Russ Harris calls this the reality gap, the distance between the relationship you have and the one you pictured. The work is to make room for that ache instead of fighting it.

### ACT WITH LOVE · THE REALITY GAP

- You can shape the climate between you by being kind, honest, and present, and you still cannot make your partner happy on command, any more than they can make you happy on command. That limit is real, and it is not proof you are failing.
- Fighting the limit keeps you stuck. Scrambling to fix their mood, or defending yourself against the disappointment, is a way of refusing it. Neither one works, and both are exhausting, because the thing you want, control over how they feel, was never available.
- Sitting with it is the harder, freer path. When you can let the painful thought be there, “I may not be able to make the person I love most happy,” without fixing it or defending against it, you stop pouring energy into an impossible job and get that energy back.
- Act on your values anyway. You cannot control the outcome, and you can still choose to be warm and honest and present, because that is the partner you want to be, whether or not it lands perfectly every time.



## TRY IT THIS WEEK

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Small reps, not one big conversation. Pick one or two of these to practice over an ordinary week.

### THIS WEEK

- Each of you writes down the story you most often tell about the other in a tense moment, and the fear that might sit under it. Trade them in a calm moment, not a hot one.
- When you catch yourself mid-story this week, run the check: what did I actually see, and what did I add? Say the difference out loud if you can.
- Once, when it would be easy to assume the worst, ask a real question instead and believe the answer you get.
- Once, swap the hard story for the soft truth underneath, and notice what your partner does with it.

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**The stories were built over a long time, and they loosen the same way, one checked assumption at a time.** When each of you can feel the fear under the other's behavior, giving the benefit of the doubt gets much easier. If the same stories keep winning no matter how hard you try, that is what couples therapy is for. This guide draws on Sue Johnson's Emotionally Focused Therapy, Russ Harris's ACT with Love, and the couples research on distress-maintaining attributions. My Mental Climb is not affiliated with or endorsed by Dr. Sue Johnson, Russ Harris, or ICEEFT.

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