



FIGHTING FOR CONNECTION

Perspectives on Conflict and
Intimate Partner Violence

Jef Slootmaeckers, Lieven Migerode,
and Linne De Loof



“De Loof skillfully guides the reader through conversations with Slootmaeckers and Migerode that offer a unique and helpful perspective on partner violence that is a great asset for all types of couples struggling with escalating conflict that ends in violence. While intended as a self-help book, it is also a terrific resource for therapists. By presenting love and violence as two sides of the same coin, they counter the taboo of speaking about situational partner violence and the shame of continuing to love someone who deeply hurts them physically and emotionally. They shift common, scrutinizing questions of, ‘What is wrong with you? with me? with us?’ to the nonjudgmental question of, ‘What is happening between us?’

They openly acknowledge the influence of Johnson’s attachment-oriented emotionally focused therapy (EFT) model, as they reframe the stigma-laden language of *perpetrator, victim, power-seeking and anger issues* to the attachment-oriented view of *aggression as contact-seeking or distance-seeking behaviors* stuck in repeating cycles of pain and powerlessness. Providing language to talk safely about partner violence, they describe vividly and compassionately how a loving connection can turn into cycles of pain.

The book paves a path of safety to talk openly about partner violence for those experiencing it first hand while isolating in a pressure cooker of shame and fear. While consistently finding the goodness in partners whose behavior has gotten out of control, and highlighting couples’ desire to stop the violence, Jef and Lieven provide an indispensable guidebook for partners willing to take responsibility to stop violent escalations. This is a vital resource to help partners to experience violence as a wake-up call to *work together* toward change to achieve the interpersonal safety, security, and connection they desire.”

Lorrie Brubacher, M.Ed., LMFT, author of *Stepping into Emotionally Focused Therapy: Key Ingredients of Change*, 2nd ed., (Routledge, 2025), Adjunct, UNC Greensboro, NC, EFT Trainer <http://www.dkceft.dk/>

“This book is a must read for anyone interested in better understanding the emotional and relational undercurrent that can lead to escalating arguments and violence in relationships, the aftermath that follows, and the path home, from disconnection to connection. With the wisdom gleaned from their shared table, their therapy spaces, and beyond, Jef and Lieven offer readers a close up look at a topic that is often hidden. Woven throughout this book are excerpts of their dialogue, stories of people grappling with the scars of violence in relationships, and, most importantly, answers to the key questions that offer compassion, care, and clarity. Whether you are a therapist, a client, or someone searching for the answers to your own proclivity to react

rather than reach during times of interpersonal threat, perceived danger, or loss, this beautifully written and accessible book will most certainly prove a trustworthy companion and guide out of helplessness and defeat into hope and resilience. Most certainly, if you or someone you know is caught in the throes of disconnection and fighting for connection, this book will provide a much-needed perspective. Highly recommended!”

Dr. T. Leanne Campbell, Registered Psychologist and
ICEEFT Executive Board Member

“How can two people love each other deeply and still hurt each other so profoundly?” This question sits at the center of this book, which offers a thoughtful and compassionate way of understanding partner violence without reducing it to blame or pathology. Rather than asking what is ‘wrong’ with one partner or the other, the authors keep the focus where it belongs: on what happens between two people in an intimate relationship when fear, longing, and loss of connection collide.

One of the book’s great strengths is how clearly it situates partner violence within the context of attachment and escalation. Many couples describe the painful realization that they have ‘crossed a line’ they never wanted to cross. The authors treat this moment not as proof that love is absent, but as a signal that something essential has broken down in the relationship’s ability to regulate intense emotion. Violence, in this framing, is not separate from love; it often emerges from its rupture.

The distinction between *hot* and *cold* partner violence is especially useful. Cold violence, one-sided and instrumental, is what most people imagine when they hear the term, but it is relatively rare. Far more common is hot violence, which unfolds in relationships marked by emotional closeness, mutual vulnerability, and unresolved attachment pain. Naming this difference allows for greater clarity, responsibility, and more accurate clinical understanding.

The authors’ use of the ‘Finally!’ moment, the sense of arrival and belonging that accompanies falling in love, beautifully captures why conflict can hurt so much. Love answers deep questions: *Am I good enough? Are you there for me? Do I belong?* When those questions are threatened, the pain can feel overwhelming. Partners respond by moving toward each other or pulling away and this familiar dance can escalate until words are no longer enough. The book helps readers see how quickly attachment fear can take over and how easily it can tip into destructive behavior.

The authors are also honest about why it is so hard to talk about partner violence. People are told to speak up, yet also hear that violence is dangerous, forbidden, and shameful. Many couples become stuck between fear

of consequences, fear of escalation, and fear of how they will be judged. Shame plays a central role here, shaping responses such as withdrawal, attack, self-blame, or avoidance. At the same time, the book captures the relief that can come when vulnerable feelings are finally spoken and met with presence rather than rejection.

The impact on children is addressed with care and realism. Asking whether conflict is harming one's children is framed as a sign of concern, not failure. While parents cannot undo what has already happened, they can acknowledge it, talk about it, and reassure their children that safety and repair matter. This simple but powerful shift can ease fear and interrupt the repetition of painful patterns across generations.

Importantly, the book challenges the belief that once violence appears, it inevitably worsens. Research and clinical experience suggest otherwise. Many couples do stop the violence, especially when they learn to recognize escalation earlier and take responsibility together for changing how they fight. The authors make clear that lasting change does not happen when one is alone, but it happens in a relationship.

This is not a book of quick solutions. It is a grounded, humane guide for couples and clinicians willing to face painful dynamics with honesty, care, and hope. I highly recommend it to anyone committed to helping relationships move toward greater safety, responsibility, and connection."

Jette Sinkjær Simon, Clinical Psychologist, Specialist in
Psychotherapy and Supervision, Director of the Danish
Center for Emotionally Focused Therapy



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Fighting for Connection

Fighting for Connection offers a fresh, nuanced perspective on conflict and partner violence, blending emotional, relational, and scientific insights through the lens of Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT). This book speaks to couples experiencing escalating conflict, as well as to professionals supporting them. It moves beyond traditional narratives of power or victimhood to explore the emotional and relational dynamics that underlie violent interactions.

Structured as a conversation between two experts in EFT and domestic violence, the authors answer the questions couples often ask themselves when caught in cycles of escalation. Readers are guided through the complexities of love, conflict, and emotional pain, engaging with the material in an accessible, empathetic style. This book combines clear explanations with research-based insights, while ensuring the language resonates with lived experiences.

With its original dual audience approach, it speaks directly to couples living through high-conflict situations and simultaneously equips therapists, counselors, and social workers with practical frameworks and strategies rooted in EFT. It reframes partner violence as a relational problem, providing pathways toward healing without oversimplifying the challenges involved. Through real-world examples, therapy principles, and actionable guidance, this book empowers readers to restore safety, connection, and empathy in relationships.

Jef Sloatmaeckers, LMFT, is the director of EFT-Belgium and a certified EFT therapist, supervisor, and trainer. He specializes in working with intimate partner violence, trauma, shame, and aggression. Jef delivers EFT and violence trainings internationally.

Lieven Migerode, C.Psych., MFT, is the founder of EFT-Belgium and a certified EFT therapist, supervisor, and trainer emeritus. With 40 years of couples therapy experience, he co-teaches EFT and violence with Jef Sloodmaeckers and has published several books and articles on love and partner violence.

Linne De Loof is a clinical psychologist, contextual systemic therapist, and EFT therapist and supervisor. She works with individuals, families, and especially couples, helping them in their quest for a safe connection. Her interest in human dynamics and passion for language is reflected in several publications and books.

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Intimate Partner Violence

**JEF SLOOTMAECKERS, LIEVEN MIGERODE,
AND LINNE DE LOOF**

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Acknowledgments

A heartfelt thank you to all the couples who entrusted us with their stories.

It is an honor to serve as the megaphone for your wisdom in this book.

INTRODUCTION

The birth of a story about partner violence

Welcome to *Fighting for Love*.

This book is authored by Jef Slootmaeckers and Lieven Migerode, both experts in the complex intersection of love and violence. Before we explore their insights, we would like to introduce these two professionals, explain for whom this book was written, describe how it came to be, and outline the context that informs it. Jef and Lieven are both couples therapists who have been working together on the topic of partner violence for nearly a decade. Yet even before they met, this issue had already connected their professional paths.

From meeting to collaboration

Jef has long been fascinated by intimate relationships and the phenomenon of partner violence. His professional involvement began almost 20 years ago. After several years of working with people experiencing homelessness, he transitioned to a shelter—a facility for women and children fleeing partner violence. He later joined the first team in Flanders offering relationship therapy to couples affected by the very same violence he had encountered in the shelter setting.

Lieven: “Jef was never just doing his job as a social worker. From the start, he was thinking deeply about the problem. He noticed that 70% of the women who came to the shelter eventually returned to their partners, despite the prevailing approach being focused on breaking off the relationship and encouraging the women to move on independently. That made him wonder: How can we understand this phenomenon? And what does it mean for the support we offer these women, their partners, and their children? He wasn’t just thinking—he started writing about it. At one point, he sent his writing to me. In it, I found true insight into how we might understand something as complex as partner violence. His perspective was far more nuanced and open than the usual judgmental narrative. That was the beginning of an intense collaboration that eventually led to the book you now hold.”

Jef: “Yes, I sort of stumbled into this field, but it grabbed me right away, and I couldn’t let it go. The dominant discourse around partner violence focused heavily on power and control, but I found that framework lacking in my day-to-day work at the shelter. In many cases, it simply didn’t align with what I was witnessing. As I searched for new ways to understand partner violence, I came across Lieven’s work. At our first meeting, I thought, ‘*Goddamn, asshole!*’ Let me explain—he’s a kind man! I had read a chapter on partner violence he had co-authored with Geertje Walraevens (Migerode & Walravens, 2011) and it included this sentence: ‘*Could it not be that love and violence are two sides of the same coin?*’ I was both startled and frustrated. I had written that exact sentence in my own notes just weeks earlier, but Lieven had published it, and I hadn’t. After a few weeks of grumbling, I realized this shouldn’t be an ending but a beginning. I needed to talk to this man who seemed to think about partner violence the same way I did.”

At the time, Lieven had over 30 years of experience working with couples at the University Psychiatric Center KU Leuven and in private practice and had been focused on partner violence since 1998. Many couples affected by violence approached a therapist, only to be turned away with the message: “Come back when there’s no more violence.” Lieven fought to create space within the therapeutic landscape for these couples, with all their struggles and suffering. That shared struggle brought Jef and Lieven together. They began collaborating—debating, analyzing, writing, and sharing experiences—and they haven’t stopped since.

For a long time, Lieven had sensed that love was missing from the discourse in couples therapy. It may sound strange, but until recently, love had been an underexplored theme in the field. Inspired by the work of Sue Johnson, who reframed love as attachment within the framework of Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), Lieven began to write about it and eventually brought EFT to

Belgium. In 2014, he led the country's first major EFT training. Jef was one of the participants. From that moment, they shared a common language for talking about relationships. Over time, they deepened their understanding of EFT's core concepts—love, attachment, emotion, and interaction—and began applying them to another underrepresented theme in couples therapy: partner violence.

Lieven: "At that point, I had all but given up on trying to introduce an approach to partner violence grounded in love. Years earlier, I had traveled to Slovenia to attend workshops by Sandra Stith, a leading expert in the field. We shared a common vision, but it never took root in Belgium. Meeting Jef changed that. He brought firsthand experience with violent couples, and I brought insights from love-centered couples therapy. EFT became the bridge connecting our perspectives. From then on, we spent years in dialogue: reviewing each other's work, co-authoring articles, and giving trainings together."

EFT as a backdrop

As you'll notice throughout this introduction, and increasingly throughout the book, Jef and Lieven frequently reference EFT. While not the central focus of the book, it forms the conceptual foundation for their approach. So, a brief explanation is in order. EFT, developed by Sue Johnson, is a relatively recent therapy model that has become one of the most thoroughly researched in the field, particularly in couples therapy. It is also applied to individuals and families. EFT views relational tensions as cycles of interaction—something we will explore in detail later in the book—rooted in the need for secure emotional attachment. This model places love at the forefront, positing that our protective responses to emotional insecurity often entrench us in recurring patterns of behavior. EFT follows a clear sequence: first, we must understand what is happening between partners before we can address it. The goal is to foster a relationship environment in which both partners can share their inner emotional world and be received with empathy, creating greater emotional safety.

Jef: "EFT is a model in which Lieven and I immediately recognized essential truths, not only for ourselves and those close to us but also for the people we work with. From our very first exposure, we were captivated. No other therapeutic approach had ever so accurately reflected what we were seeing in practice. We immersed ourselves in the model: we became certified EFT therapists, then supervisors, and eventually trainers. And even now, it continues to