



**A Conversation with Elizabeth Earnshaw, LMFT, CGT
Author of *I Want This to Work***

Q. You are an accomplished, licensed marriage and family therapist, clinical fellow of the American Association of Marriage & Family Therapy, head therapist at Actually, and owner of A Better Life Therapy in Pennsylvania & New Jersey, and the author of the upcoming book *I Want This to Work*.

But let's start at the beginning—when did you know that you wanted to dedicate your professional career to helping others through counseling? Was it something you were always interested in? Did you find it, or did it find you?

A. I didn't originally think anything about becoming a therapist. I'm sure at some point I saw a movie where it looked like a very romantic career, but I initially went to school for teaching. I kind of figured out, very early on, that I was not a great teacher at all. I was a terrible teacher. I couldn't do classroom management to save my life because I was way too focused on individual needs and wanting to connect individually with the students. I would be focused on one kid while the rest of the kids were running around the room. But in my work as a teacher, I ended up seeing how much I actually liked working with the adults and the entire family unit, so I decided that it would probably be best if I did something where I had more engagement with the family and a little bit less engagement with the classroom.

And so I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do, and as I was driving down a highway, I saw a billboard for a couples and family therapy program, and I was like, *Oh! Maybe that's what I should do!* So I went home, and I applied for this program that I saw on a billboard. That was the only place I applied to, and the rest was history.

I got in and went through this couples and family therapy program, and I still thought I wanted to work with families and little kids, so I went to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina to help rebuild the mental health system. I was working in schools as the Director of Student Services. I was working with a lot of families, and as I was doing that work, a lot of the parents were asking if I'd be willing to meet with them after school to do couples therapy work because they were recognizing that what was going on between them was impacting a lot of what was happening with the kids. Once I started doing more of that, I started to realize that I really just liked working with the parents. So from that point on, I started to make my major focus on working with couples.

I'm really glad that I went down I-676 that day. Who knows where I'd be today if I had taken a different route and noticed one of the jewelry billboards instead!

Q. Tell us about your practice: A Better Life Therapy. Why did you start it, when did you start it, who do you work with?

A. After I left New Orleans, I came back to Pennsylvania for a guy. I left a great job I had in Louisiana and took one of those jobs where you're completely overworked and completely underpaid. I was working in that job for a few months, and I thought that me and this guy were going to have a happily ever after. And

then I found out he had another girlfriend. And then I had a paycheck bounce at my job. They couldn't pay me! So I decided that my life needed to be detonated and I needed to start over. And that's how I decided to start my practice.

I was leaving a job where I wasn't happy, I was leaving my relationship, and I wanted to do something that felt in alignment with me. For the first time ever, I wasn't just gonna go with the flow, move back to Philadelphia for a guy, or take the first job that came along. I really wanted to do something that aligned with who I was. I wanted to help other people, and I felt there was a way to do that without me being completely burnt out or completely overtaken by the relationship I was in, which was definitely affecting my career.

I started my practice in 2013—it was super small. I had an office where if you opened the wingspan of your arms, you could touch each wall; it was so tiny. I signed a short-term lease for three months, and I kept looking for jobs because I really didn't think it was going to work. But I actually ended up getting clients pretty quickly; I was seeing a lot of couples come through the door. And then a friend of mine, who was working in a similar field and had just had a baby, was also really burnt out over work and unhappy. I told her that she should come work with me and create an environment where it's okay to have a life and work and do really good work for other human beings while taking care of ourselves. So she did, and we did, and it kind of grew from there.

My mission was to grow a therapy practice where we were not only treating our clients with so much warmth, and love, and respect (which is sadly missing in a lot of the mental health world because of the way insurance moves people along), but where the therapists were also being treated with a ton of respect and love. Since then, our team has grown to 20, and it's still very similar to how it was in the beginning. People are able to take care of themselves and also take really, really good care of other people.

Q. Sometimes, therapists can become so invested in helping others that it's easy to forget about taking care of themselves. Have you found this to be the case? What are some ways you prioritize your mental health and self care?

A. Absolutely. I think that the type of person who's drawn to being a therapist tends to be the caretaker type; we really do care about the people we work with. I tell my clients all the time, "I see some of you more than I see my friends. I know more about you than I know about some of my friends." I think about them. When things are happening in their lives that are really challenging and painful, I do carry that with me.

But I have learned that the best way to make sure I'm showing up for them is to make sure that I'm showing up for myself. The way that I do that is that I make sure that once work is done, work is done. After I'm done with my sessions for the day, I really do close my laptop. I used to close my door (pre-COVID!), but now I close my laptop. I spend a lot of time with my family, I make sure I have "nothing box" time (that's what my husband calls it) where I can just watch TV or scroll on my phone; I spend a lot of time outside, and I spend a lot of time with my friends. I'm a really creative person, so I enjoy doing anything that has to do with creativity.

But one of the biggest gifts that I've given to myself in terms of taking care of my mental health is to really know how I want to engage with work. To me, the things that have the biggest impact on my mental health are work and bad relationships. As I've grown to have better boundaries, I don't have bad relationships anymore, and I don't have a bad work-life anymore.

Q. When it comes to social media, content can often feel shallow and fake—looking at people's highlight reels, staged photos, filters, etc. But your work and content, which is the opposite of that, has found great traction and popularity through your Instagram account @lizlistens. Have you been surprised by that? What do you think it is about your work that resonates with people on that platform?

A. I started my Instagram account, @lizlistens, in 2018, recognizing that I was never an avid social media user. There wasn't much on social media that resonated with me, but the things that were interesting to me tended to be more fact-based. I really liked looking at pictures on National Geographic's Instagram feed and following different news networks. I felt there was a huge hole when it came to psychological, mental, and relational health content; it really wasn't easy then to find Instagram accounts where you could learn something about how to have better relationships with other people.

I was also recognizing that in my sessions with couples, we were wasting a lot of time talking about information that they truly should've learned somewhere else. We call it psychoeducation. So, for instance, I would be spending a lot of time talking to them about why criticism is detrimental to a relationship, or what it means to be a good listener or ways in which you can express your message that's less likely to get the other person into a state where they feel like they have to defend themselves, and this really isn't stuff that you need a therapist to explain to you in a therapy room. You can read it in a book or take a class to learn about it and save the time in the therapy room for deeper work, so I found myself being frustrated for the client. We weren't able to get into the important conversations because they didn't have the foundational knowledge.

So I thought it would be a good idea to put that foundational information online, where people could access it and then go into their therapy sessions with a little bit more information and some language and education.

I was really surprised because the traction grew pretty quickly, and people had a great response to it. And now, it's everywhere. Everyone is talking about mental health on social media; there are some accounts that are really, really good, there are some accounts that aren't necessarily as good, but it's all over the place.

People are really hungry for that content—they want to know how can I feel better, how can I be a better parent, how can I be a better partner, and they want to know about it in ways that are not overwhelming. They need bite-size, digestible information that they can walk away with and think about for a little bit.

I find that my audience really likes it when I normalize something; when I tell them how human it is for couples to get into arguments or talk about how human it is sometimes not to say the right thing, or sometimes second-guess yourself, or to have needs. So people want that normalization of their experience, and then they want that followed up with fun information about why it's normal—some science or research behind it—and then what they like to know is *'okay, now what? what can I do with it?'* And so, I try to provide all three of those things on my Instagram feed.

It's really cool—I'm starting to have many people who come in for therapy, and they already have this language, and it's incredibly helpful.

Q. You've written your first book, *I Want This to Work*. Tell me about why you wrote it, who you wrote it for, the need you've observed for this book, and your hopes for how it will help people?

A. I wrote *I Want This to Work* for the same reasons that I created the Instagram account. I recognized that so many people that I was either working within the therapy room or coming into contact with online were really hungry for information about what it means to have a healthy relationship. They were really interested in the underneath of all of it—why people do what they do, what it means about them, and what they can do about that.

I wanted to write this book to create this all-inclusive guide to how humans behave in relationships and the many ways in which you might have developed to behave that way, whether it is because of your childhood or because of what's happened in the actual relationship.

Another reason I really wanted to write this book is because there are so many other wonderful relationship books out there, but a lot of them are fairly dated at this point, and they don't include information that might be pertinent to couples in the world today. They aren't very diverse, in terms of the

types of couples they represent in the book, in the dialogue that's presented, and they also don't include a lot about what it's like to manage the high levels of stress that we manage in our world, and I wanted to include all of that. I wanted to talk about things we know now around power and privilege and relationships and how those show up in our partnerships. I didn't see any of those things in the books that were already out there.

This book is written for couples who are really wanting a relationship to work. They know they still love each other, and they know this could be a good thing, but they keep coming up against the same problems, again and again. I want to help them see that a lot of what they're coming up against is fairly normal in terms of what I see in the therapy room and that it can be overcome. But if they don't have the foundational knowledge for what's going on, how to conceptualize what's going on, how to talk about what's going on, and then tools to use to overcome it, then the relationship becomes hard, and we continually replicate patterns. And because those patterns get exhausting, people break up, and they don't always necessarily need to do that.

I also wanted to write this book for people who aren't necessarily in therapy or can only go to therapy sometimes but are really looking for ways to change their relationship and understand it better.

My biggest hope for *I Want This to Work* is that it will almost feel like therapy in a book. You're being taken through the different stages of therapy, you're assessing your relationship, thinking about how it's impacted you personally, thinking about the ways in which your relationship is impacting your partner, thinking about what you're responsible for in terms of what you need to change for this relationship to be better, and it offers you some really great tools you can use so that you can overcome a lot of the challenges that you may be facing in your relationship.

Q. The subtitle describes the book as "an inclusive guide"—what does that mean and why is that important to you?

A. The word 'inclusive' has so many meanings that apply to this book. The first, which was really important to me and was one of the first things I made sure we did in this book, is that any couple can see themselves in the book. So the different types of couples that I've included in the text and even the artwork in the book include humans across the spectrum of life in terms of gender identity, sexuality, race, age, ethnicity, nationality, and ability. I really wanted to make sure that people weren't picking up a book and having to push themselves to see themselves in it, but rather they can say, *'Oh, this can apply to me, too. I'm not being left out in this.'*

The first reason this is important to me is that there are all types of relationships in this world, and most people in relationships struggle similarly.

It was so important to me because I would have couples, again and again in my office, who did not fit what was being shown in books of the past. I would have gay couples, mixed-race couples who were from other countries, couples with one or both people who were non-binary, and it would come up consistently in our sessions: "Well I really loved this book that my last therapist recommended to me, but does it really apply to us? I didn't see one example of us in the book. All I heard about were straight, white couples, so I'm not really sure if what they were sharing is something that applies to me." Oftentimes they would actually go through the book and change things so that their mind could try to imagine how it applies to them. They might try to change the wording to see if it applied to a queer couple to see if it really fits them. They had to do so much work to make these relationship books work for them. Sadly, my clients had to start bringing it up to me—a white woman in a straight relationship. When I read the books, they go very smoothly for me. I don't necessarily notice what's not being included because I'm being included. But as my clients brought it up to me, I started feeling really embarrassed to even offer these books to them because they weren't included. And even though I knew that the information in the books mostly applied to them, it didn't feel right to ask them to read them anymore. So I started taking information that fit from those books and made my own little worksheets and resources instead of recommending the books.

I remember re-reading the books and thinking, *'it would have been so easy just to take a minute to be a little more inclusive.'* So when I talked to Sounds True, my publisher, I told them the most important thing to me was that they weren't going to make me only write to one type of couple. I wanted the freedom to include many different people in this book and to make them feel seen. And they were totally on board with that!

The second way 'inclusive' applies to the book is that it includes a ton of relationship information. I really tried to include what is learned about relationships from all the major sources because I recognized that people feel as though they're pulled in all these different directions by different therapy modalities. People would say, "Well, I identified my attachment style, but this post is talking about inner child work, so does that mean that my attachment style is an inner child problem?," or, "I went to an EFT therapist who said that I need to talk about my feelings, but now this post is saying that I need to regulate my body because that's what we should do thematically, does that mean I shouldn't talk about my feelings anymore?" I felt that it would be helpful to have one spot where we can help people see how all of this stuff actually overlaps.

When you look at all the different modalities of couples therapy, the really interesting thing is that they're mostly all saying the same thing, with a slight twist. They each have their thing. For EFT, it's really important to be emotionally connected. For Gottman, it's more about psychoeducation and understanding the how-to's of talking, so it's very structured. For Imago, although it talks about the importance of structure and feelings, it's essential to explore the inner child stuff. So there are all of these different modalities, but they really overlap and include many of the same central themes. So I wanted to make sure there was one book, like a manual, where people could go in, and they could see how their attachment style can exist alongside the inner child stuff that's going on for them, and alongside the ways we use Gottman's communication skills to talk to our partner.

I worked really hard to be sure the book is inclusive of all of the major research and ideologies behind healthy relationships.

Q. In the book, you address the three challenges that couples must tackle to repair and strengthen their relationships. What are those, and why are they crucial to a couple's success?

There are three challenges that couples face: conflict, healing, and connection. All couples, if they're in a long-term relationship, are going to face conflict. No one is immune to that. I joke that when I hear couples who've been together for 60 years say, "We've never argued a day in our life," I'm like, "Ugh... if one of you needs to blink twice for help right now..." I just don't believe that two human beings can be together for an extended period of time, navigating the complications of life without facing conflict! It's just not realistic to think that two different human beings in a relationship have their own history, personality, values, and perspectives, fuse when they get together, and never disagree or let each other down or mess up.

When it comes to conflict, couples have to learn to normalize healthy conflict while also recognizing unhealthy conflict, they have to learn to take responsibility for their part in the conflict, and then they have to be able to recognize that their partner is not them, recognize them for who they are, and then decide if they actually want to work with that person. Those are three of the challenges couples face within the larger challenge of conflict.

One of the challenges that couples have is to learn how to normalize conflict. How to say, *'okay, it's normal that we're arguing, it's normal that he has a complaint, it's normal that we don't agree all of the time,'* while still recognizing what's not normal. It's not normal that we're showing disgust with each other all the time, it's not normal that we put each other down, it's not normal that we're constantly screaming, it's not normal that our conflict is making me scared or that it's interrupting the functioning of my life. Being able to normalize healthy conflict and stick in it and actually work through it while also recognizing the conflict that's not healthy is a major challenge. And once we recognize it, are we able to take responsibility for the part that we have in the conflict? And are we able to lean into being better communicators, into talking more effectively about what's bothering us and what we need so that our

partner can receive that differently? And, individually, are we willing to work to be better at receiving information so that things don't become so damaging or explosive over time. One of the biggest challenges in conflict is recognizing that your partner is not you. So when we first meet each other, we see our partner as this ideal unicorn. We think they're amazing, and anything that they do, even if we don't like it, they're a mess, or they're a little bit late sometimes, we just chalk it up to who they are, and we love them, and everything is fine. In the beginning, we're okay with it when other people are different than us because we have all of these love hormones that are running through our bodies, telling us to bond with this person. Well, those hormones go away, and you start to see the person for who they really are. And when that happens, we're like no, I don't like it that they're late, I don't like it that they make decisions this way, I don't like it that they're a little bit messy, and we tend to want the other person to be fake and behave the way we do. And we get mad that they don't. We say things like "I would never act like that" or "If that was me, I would have done XY&Z." So a huge challenge in conflict is to be able to recognize that your partner is not you, and actually recognize who they are, and then deciding if you actually want to work with that person as they are and if so, that means the two of you have to figure out how to deal with those differences together in a way that is not critical or harmful for either of you.

The second major challenge we then have is learning how to heal well with each other. There are going to be moments of disappointment and rupture within the relationship. However, couples who are really great at repairing from that are able to heal. Over time, my husband and I have become better at repairing after conflict, which means that we quickly accept each other's apologies. We very quickly apologize, and we talk about what we need to do next.

In my book, I talk about how important it is to have structured conversations around healing so that you know how to move forward in a way where you're not just brushing things under the rug, but instead, you're healing whatever happens and then coming up with a way to avoid it in the future. Most couples struggle with this because instead of healing the right way, stuff gets skipped. The most common thing that gets skipped is that couples just don't talk about it. Everything goes back to normal, and they don't want to touch it with a ten-foot pole, so they stay away from it until it comes up later again. I'll even have that happen in the therapy room where couples will come in, and they'll say, "On Monday, we got into this huge argument, and it was terrible, I even threatened divorce," and I'll say, "well let's talk about it," and they'll say "oh well it was five days ago, we don't want to go back to that." Couples really struggle to actually move forward if they don't talk about it after the fact. In the book, I talk a lot about what you need to do to have a conversation that's expected there because most people don't want to touch it with a ten-foot pole because they're really afraid they're going to argue again. Still, there's a really effective way that you can talk about what's happened without going into the argument.

The other thing that holds couples back with healing is that they don't offer an apology, or they don't accept the apology. The third thing is that they don't actually plan how to avoid it in the future, which means we can't make a plan moving forward to make sure it doesn't happen again. If any one of those three areas of healing gets skipped, couples will just go right back into the conflict, over and over and over again, and they kind of create a pattern. I talk about these patterns, and I help couples identify what their pattern is in the book.

The third major challenge is connection, and obviously, connection is really important. Connection is what we go into the relationship for. We don't go into the relationship to have conflict with people and to have to clean it up. We go into the relationship because we want connection. That's what feels so good in the beginning - there's an easy connection, and our hormones are helping us connect. But over time, we become responsible for putting the motivation into ourselves to continue to connect because those hormones don't keep doing it for us. I talk to couples about what is important in terms of creating a connection that you can maintain over time. Some of those things include being able to manage stress well with each other, making sure you have a ritualized way of seeing each other, setting goals together and actually checking in on those goals, and then also making sure that you're continually thinking about how meaningful things are in the relationship, and what meaning the relationship brings to your life.

Q. If a couple wants it to work, and you can only give them one piece of relationship advice, what is it?

A. Learn to have a willingness to do what the other person is asking you to do for them. If you don't have that willingness, your relationship isn't going to change.

Q. You're also the head therapist at Actually. Can you tell me about what Actually is and what it exists to do?

Actually is a relational wellness company that is currently in the startup phases, and we're working to develop a virtual system for helping couples to build healthy relationships.

One of the things that we noticed in our research is that a lot of couples will say that they need help, but a huge number of them have never sought it out. The research shows that couples wait an average of six years before they get help. Six years of facing the problem before they get help. We wanted to figure out why that is, so we interviewed tons of couples. We found that the reason a lot of couples don't seek help is either that they don't think their problem is big enough, so they think they should only be getting help from a therapist if they've gone through a major infidelity or if there's something terrible that's happened in their lives or they're thinking of divorce, or they'll say the process of therapy feels way too scary. It feels like once they go through the therapist's door, the closet is going to be open, and it's going to be full of information that they don't want to see. And so they avoid it. Those two reasons—either our problem isn't big enough, OR we probably have really big problems, and it's going to be too much to solve, or it's going to be too scary to look at, are making people avoid getting relationship education and guided support for their relationship. So we are starting Actually to make couples work feel easy, fun, not scary, and accessible to what you're experiencing in the moment.

We're creating different programs related to life stages so that couples can see that it's normal for you, in this life stage, to want to talk about things. It doesn't mean you have a problem, and it doesn't mean that we're going to pull all the problems out; it just means we're going to support you and give you real tangible skills for you to navigate this stage. So we're going to have premarital, having a new baby, empty nesting, and others. All life stages can bring up a lot of feelings and sometimes a lot of conflicts.

Q. Do you think there's still a stigma attached to seeking therapy? Why do you think that is, and do you think it will ever change?

A. It's certainly changing. There is less and less stigma in millennial and Gen Z groups; I think therapy is becoming very normalized. People wear t-shirts that say things like, "I go to therapy." It's certainly still stigmatized among certain groups, but it's becoming less stigmatized, and I think a lot of it has to do with how it's discussed on Instagram and other social media platforms. People are really curious about what it's like to go to a therapist.

But I do think that the stigma around relationship counseling is still pretty strong. I don't think people feel comfortable walking around in a t-shirt that says, "We go to couples counseling." There are lots of shirts that say, "I'm managing my anxiety today," but I don't think there are many that say, "I'm struggling with my sex life." It's just not as normalized yet, and there's still a lot of shame involved for people when they are struggling in their marriages. They believe it's something to be embarrassed about, think that others aren't struggling in the same way and that it must be a personal failing on their part.

I really am hopeful that the more this stuff is discussed online, the more we post about it, the more there are podcasts and companies like Actually, the more we can help people understand that it's normal to need help in a relationship. Normal. If it's normal for you to get help as an individual, why would it not be normal for you to get help when there are two individuals. I mean, that's a lot of issues. There are two individuals that are having to navigate all of life's stressors together. They're navigating money, and friendship, and jobs, and child-rearing, and illnesses, together. And so, of course—and this is what I want people to know—of course you have issues. Of course you argue with each other. Of course sometimes you let each other down or get annoyed with each other. And, when you can get help, whether it's reading a book or seeing a therapist or taking an online course when you can identify there's a problem and get help, you are not only helping the relationship, you're helping your own mental health.

Study after study has shown that the biggest factor on our mental health is our relationships. It's not other things, it's relationships. If we have mental health challenges, it's our relationships that help us to overcome them. If we're facing stress, it's the quality of our relationships that helps us overcome it. If we're having a bad time, and we have a great partner, that bad time is still a bad time, but if we have a village we feel supported by in the world, things don't feel as bleak and hopeless because we know we have this safety net that's going to catch us.

I think there's a lot of stigmas, but I hope that people can start to see how much of our lives are influenced by our relationships and feel really proud of themselves when they ask for help with them.

Q. 2020—and now 2021—have been challenging years for everyone. As a therapist, what did you observe about the effects of the pandemic, the election, the chaos and unrest on individuals' and couples' relationships? Have you seen more seek therapy, seen people withdraw? Are people prioritizing their mental health or neglecting it?

A. Since everything that happened in 2020, therapy has definitely skyrocketed. I've seen the need for therapy increase, and not only the need, but I've seen more people reaching out for it.

One thing I saw as a huge result of the pandemic on relationships is that we have to face all of these stressors together. It can be really hard. Couples were having to face these things together. Still, many of them were stuck in different countries, different cities, facing job losses, navigating who takes care of the kids when they can't be in school, etc., so there was a huge increase of stress on couples.

And what was even more challenging was that many couples were already facing stressors before any of this happened, and they weren't addressing them, so now they had all these compounding stressors. So now they're coming to therapy, after having gone through the past year of trauma, loss, stress, being disappointed in each other for feeling like the other person didn't get it right, like the other person wasn't navigating it the way the other person expected them to, feeling let down, all of this stuff. And then, on top of it, there's still all of these things to navigate that they've never discussed in the past. We've had a lot of people come into the office saying, "I want to talk about how mad I am that my partner and I didn't come together on whether or not we should wear masks, and we never addressed the fact that there was an affair three years ago," or "I really felt let down when I experienced a pregnancy loss, and I feel like my partner didn't even respond to that." So a lot of couples are coming in with a lot of multilayered issues right now, and it's incredibly challenging.

Q. What is it that you hope to accomplish through your work? How do you feel lives can be changed for the better through therapy?

A. I am passionate about relationships because they hold so much power. They really influence the individual and the couple, their mental health, and everyone around them. When we focus on relationships, we're really helping to make sure that we relieve stress and pain for the people around that particular relationship, too. That includes their children. Children struggle when the adults are struggling. If we can help adults to have better emotional intelligence, communicate better, have healthier conflict, and show really healthy ways of connecting, then children are going to grow up feeling safer and more secure and better able to recognize healthy relationships.

We also impact the people around us because of our relationship. When we have a better relationship with our partner, it's much easier to have good relationships with our friends and our family members. But when people have relationships with their partners that are tumultuous, conflict-filled, and hurtful, it becomes really difficult for children, friends, and family members to be around that couple, and it really impacts them.

I believe a lot of the stress we see in our smaller nuclear units comes from people not knowing how to navigate their relationships with each other. But when we learn these skills, and when we learn to behave in a way in which we respect others through our actions, and in which we are asserting the fact that we

deserve respect, too, it's not just us, it's not just the individual that does better, it's the entire community around them that is positively impacted.