



In *The Joy Switch*, learn how the flip of a mental switch either enables you to remain present for those around you or causes you to become overwhelmed—and ultimately inhibited from being your best self—when problems arise. Learn to love others and remain holistically connected with yourself while being the best version of who you were made to be.

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## CHAPTER 1

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# FIRING UP YOUR RELATIONAL CIRCUIT

### QUICK TAKE

Inside our brain is a relational circuit. This important circuit oversees our ability to experience joy and stay engaged with the people we love. As long as this circuit remains ON, we *feel* like interacting with people. We *want to connect*. We are relationally present. The full range of our relational abilities is working. Once this relational circuit goes OFF, we shut down. Our ability to be relational is now diminished. Our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors change. At this point, we are in a different brain state where people feel like annoyances, objects, even enemies. With practice, we can learn to recognize the status of our

relational circuit. If we notice we are offline, we can fire it back up using steps I call activating the Joy Switch. In this relational state, glad-to-be-together joy is the fuel for our relationships. The longer we live without joy, the harder it will be to keep our relational circuit running. But simple joy practices return us to relational mode and keep us relational for longer periods of time.

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**SO HOW DO WE GET** this relational circuit humming again? How can we flip that Joy Switch?

Most of us don't realize we have a relational engine in our head, which influences *everything* about us—thoughts, behaviors, feelings. Learning to use the Joy Switch prevents relational failures, because we move back to relational mode when we “fall out.” This action brings out the best in ourselves and in the people we love. Learning to use the Joy Switch is your edge.

With practice, we notice the status of our relational circuit, so we know if we need to use the Joy Switch to return to relational mode. When we, or others, see we are slipping out of relational mode, we can take the steps to restore our relational circuit breaker. Over time, we can learn preventative measures to stay engaged. This is the switched-on life. The Joy Switch exercises in this book provide hands-on practice to stay relational and repair once we go offline. A little bit of practice with joy on the good days provides the

reserve we can pull from on the hard days.

I remember a time my friend lost access to his relational circuit because big emotions and upset made it hard to stay relational . . .

### WHEN FUSES BLOW

Years ago, I was sitting at the breakfast table with several attendees at a training event.<sup>1</sup> Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a shadowy figure looming over my shoulder. Before I could figure out the identity of this visitor, I heard a booming voice: “*Chris, I have a bone to pick with you!*” His tone told me this was no joke.

Every person sitting at the table paused their conversations. I recognized this individual as one of the attendees participating in the conference I was leading. Let’s call him Mason.<sup>2</sup> One glance at Mason’s face told me everything I needed to know: The howling winds of adversity were about to change the course of my peaceful morning. I felt my shoulders tighten. A knot twisted in my stomach. I took a deep breath, then braced for impact.

Mason leaned in and let loose. “How could you play that video yesterday? What were you thinking?” Mason yelled at the top of his lungs. He was now hot with anger; his whole face almost blazed with intensity. Mason’s relational circuit was offline. What we call “big emotions” were spilling out.

I quickly realized the short video I had played the previous day about a family suffering for their faith must have set Ma-

son off. *Normally people enjoy this video!* I thought to myself. The video depicted how to stay relational and loving under difficult circumstances. I was unsure why this video bothered Mason so much, but I knew it must have struck a nerve.

I broke eye contact to look at my friends sitting at the breakfast table. Each person looked stunned. Their faces reminded me of deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car. I knew this situation would require creativity. Mason needed his Joy Switch to access his relational self, which by now was missing in action. In this state, Mason's upset hindered him from noticing all of us had reached the threshold of our ability to stay connected. We were beginning to feel run over by Mason's intensity.

I recognized I needed my Joy Switch to stabilize this situation, so I took a deep breath. I prayed for wisdom. Activating my relational circuit was crucial for what happened next.

### INSIDE MASON'S BRAIN

The relational circuit is valuable real estate located on the right side of the brain. This relational engine is a four-level command center, an *emotional control center*<sup>3</sup> that runs our life for success. If neuroscientists could have scanned Mason's brain during this confrontation, they would have seen that his relational engine was severely disorganized. The bottom two levels of his control center had stopped communicating with the higher two levels. Because the four levels are similar to workstations in an office where

different areas work together, once one area stops talking with the others, problems arise. This “company” will be in disarray. Now we become emotionally disorganized and relationally disconnected. Our brain shifts from its ideal state of joy to a diminished state where fear, anger, or something else takes over. For Mason, the consequences of this breakdown meant he felt angry, alone, and unregulated—out of control. This was a perfect storm.

All of us encounter perfect storms where we lose it. Our relational circuit can only handle so much intensity before something gives and we “snap.” What kinds of things make you snap? Is it when you feel ignored or pushed beyond your limits? Is it when someone disrespects you or your spouse doesn’t do something you asked them to do? How well we handle difficulty depends on our ability to manage what we are feeling.

The things that make us snap are precisely what turns off our relational circuit. At this point, we lose our ability to stay flexible and put ourselves in another person’s shoes to see their perspective. The “off mode” in the brain’s relational circuit is like *airplane mode*, the function that powers down your digital device during a flight. We no longer receive a relational signal to hear what people are saying. There is nothing fun about this breakdown. Most of life can be lived in “off mode” without realizing it, just like you might get off a plane with your device still in airplane mode.

### THE DANGER OF BIG FEELINGS

Staying in *relational airplane mode* increases the likelihood we will have ruptured relationships, conflicts, arguments, rejection, and isolation because people don't always know what to do with big feelings—emotions that can quickly spin out of control. Anger that is rising to rage. Fear that is becoming paralyzing terror.

We will look at more Joy Switch examples. For now, it's safe to say: big emotions we cannot handle wreak havoc on our ability to stay anchored. We lose all flexibility and creativity, all ability to be resourceful—all of them essential elements to solving problems. When a breakdown occurs, problems become bigger. Our focus turns to what bothers us. We struggle to quiet ourselves. Unfiltered words fly into our mind and out our mouth. We say or do things we regret. People we care about feel like enemies. We want to win.

Our ability to use the Joy Switch determines whether we stay calm, cool, and collected—or emotionally unfettered, out of control. And Mason? We will return to him in chapter 3, after we learn a bit more about the relational circuit and what your life looks like when it's ON and OFF.

### YOU'RE ON!

Consider your ideal day for a moment. What makes it good? Is it because nothing bad happens? You spend the day outdoors in nature? You finish an important project?

You spend time with someone you haven't seen in a long time? Everything goes smoothly without a hitch? Odds are high, one element in your ideal day is when you are with someone you enjoy and they enjoy you.

This means people are glad to be together. And when the relational circuit is fully engaged, people are kind, generous, loving, sincere, and considerate. People light up to see each other. Joy comes easy. So do smiles. We feel thankful. We find it easy to enjoy life. We recover when things go wrong.

The way our brain works, we look back in the rearview mirror of life to predict the future. *We look behind us to predict next steps.* This is the brain's way of learning from history to avoid pain. The approach works fine when we see a life of joy and peace in our rearview mirror. We expect more joy and peace around the corner.

However, when pain, frustration, ruptured relationships, and hardship happen, we expect more bad stuff around the bend. Resignation creeps in. We feel uncertain about the future. We may stop trying or caring. Even give up hope. This is when our relational circuit checks out.

### **THE BEST VERSION OF OURSELVES**

While the relational circuit influences everything about us, we can learn to control it. The goal with our relational circuit is to return to relational mode *as quickly as possible*. Falling out of relational mode is a lot like trying to hold our breath underwater. It doesn't take long before our peace leaks out.

Once our relational circuit is up and running, we regain our ability to be self-aware, flexible, compassionate, understanding, and, above all, *relational*. At this point, we are in the ideal state for joy and peace. This state of being our best is known as *acting like ourselves*.<sup>4</sup> We act like ourselves when we say and do the things that align with our identity. *We reflect who we are meant to be*.<sup>5</sup> We are simply a more creative, relational, likeable version of ourselves. Some would even say we have high emotional intelligence.



### *Expecting joy*

Speaking of joy, the relational circuit comes on when we *expect joy*. Joy is the fuel to run the brain's relational engine. Joy is *glad-to-be-togetherness*, where we light up to see others and they light up to see us.<sup>6</sup> We are the sparkle in someone's eyes.<sup>7</sup> The nonverbal dance of eye smiles makes us feel seen and special. This exchange is more of a reflex than a choice or decision of the will.<sup>8</sup>

Joy is the relational transaction, an exchange with shared glances, smiles, body movements, and voice tones to convey, "I am really glad to see you!" The presence of joy is the turbo-booster, while the absence of joy leaves us on fumes. The relational circuit breaks down when joy runs low. We sputter with little ability to reach our goals and recover

when something goes wrong. There is nothing fun about feeling stuck. (Just ask Mason.)

Consider meeting with one of your best friends. What do you expect to see on your friend's face and hear in your friend's voice? What will your friend see and hear from you? Joy! Joy is the ideal emotion for interacting with the people we love. Joy is our brain's sweet spot.

Once we have enough face-to-face joy, we are ready for a pause, the breather that allows rest so we can build more joy. A rhythm develops. We alternate high-energy joy with low-energy rest as two brain states. In this case, being "low energy" is a good thing. But if every time you see your best friend they seem angry, your relational circuit will stay off because there is no joy. We can say the relational circuit gives us *relational superpowers*. We learn to use the Joy Switch to activate relational abilities that turn us into superheroes.

### YOUR SECRET WEAPON

One of my favorite grade-school teachers was Mrs. Harris, as I'll call her. This caring woman helped each student feel important. She was patient, compassionate, and kind. I also remember a middle school teacher, whom we'll call Mr. Becker, who frequently lost his temper. He swore in class. He threw things. Mr. Becker even stormed out of the classroom on several occasions. I dreaded his class. Even though I sat in these classrooms over thirty years ago, I can still remember their faces, voice tones, and mannerisms. One

brought joy while the other brought sadness—and a little bit of fear! One had a working relational circuit, the other not so much. Can you see the difference?

As I said, a fully functioning relational circuit turns us into superheroes. This doesn't mean we gain a cape and leap over tall buildings, but our superpowers are the *relational abilities, the skills, that allow us to be resilient*. Here is our secret weapon to overcome challenges and pain. Relational skills we have developed over the course of our life are ready to use when we activate the “secret circuit.”<sup>9</sup>

### ***Beware kryptonite!***

Like Superman, however, the relational circuit has a vulnerability. We are susceptible to a kind of kryptonite, where we lose *access* to our “relational superpowers.” Our kryptonite can be a person who is a source of upset, a reminder of past pain, a situation that always ruffles us—say, feeling rejected or let down. Pretty much anything that upsets us and causes a strong reaction has the potential to deactivate our relational circuit. When the relational circuit shifts to the OFF position, we go into this airplane mode state, or what Dr. Jim Wilder calls *Enemy Mode*.<sup>10</sup> Enemy mode is a reduced version of our personality where we become *relationally restricted*. Our relational superpowers diminish. People we normally enjoy feel like enemies. We lose our compassion. This happens a lot in families where spouses can't stand each other. Children resent parents and parents

despise children. This reduced state of functioning happens in the workplace, in church, in politics. Everywhere. We have no shortage of examples. All too often our relational circuit dims and we become indifferent. We give up. Maybe we become numb to the things that used to bother us. We lose energy and motivation to care or “give a rip.” We begin to coast on relational autopilot.

**The fight to be right knows no end in enemy mode.**

Our good intentions and willpower take a backseat to emotional capacity; that is, *our ability to manage what we feel and regulate our emotions*. Qualities like focus, self-control, kindness, patience, and understanding feel elusive, just out of reach. A slew of problems arise with enemy mode. The people we care about become problems to solve or enemies to defeat.<sup>11</sup> Arguments, conflicts, fighting, disagreements, and negative emotions become bigger and more important than relationships. The fight to be right knows no end in enemy mode.

Negative emotions and big feelings happen to all of us. The trick is to learn how to return to being relational. If we know how to use our Joy Switch, the disappearing act of our relational self will be only momentary. How long we stay stuck comes down to *practice and training*. The amount of time our relational circuit remains off is often much longer than it needs to be. Living in enemy mode negatively impacts our personality, relationships, interactions, and pretty

much every area of life where we need a working brain.<sup>12</sup>

This “stuckness” leads to the loss of abilities we often take for granted, such as the ability to stay loving, kind, thoughtful, caring, considerate, compassionate, and generous. It means the unwelcome appearance of personality distortions like narcissism, which disrupt relationships and destroy communities.<sup>13</sup> Narcissism is a lot like toxic mold flourishing in our basement, contaminating the air we breathe. Narcissism, the inability to shift out of enemy mode and process shame, robs joy and keeps people stuck in enemy mode. Doesn't this sound fun?

### THE JOY GAP

With a working relational circuit, relational joy becomes our new normal, the sweet spot for our nervous system.<sup>14</sup> Glad-to-be-together joy shrinks our *Joy Gap*,<sup>15</sup> *the amount of time between shared states of joy*. The Joy Gap is where we prefer as little time as possible to pass before we grow more joy. A wider Joy Gap means more time passes between moments of shared joy. This hurts! Low joy hardens us in ways we don't like. The presence of joy thaws our character to grow in wisdom and grace.



This “joy shortage” translates to the diminished ability to stay relational while we handle hard stuff. It’s challenging to stay relational when joy levels drop. Joy substitutes become alluring. Our cravings increase. We gravitate toward pseudo-joys, the artificial, nonrelational replacements we seek for comfort.<sup>16</sup> Addictions come into play in the form of BEEPS, what my friend Ed Khouri calls *Behaviors, Experiences, Events, People, and Substances*.<sup>17</sup> We turn to BEEPS when our joy levels run low.

BEEPS are what we turn to when we feel lonely, overwhelmed, and in need of an artificial substitute for joy and rest. BEEPS compensate for our inability to recover from negative emotions. Some of the more common BEEPS are playing video games longer than we should, watching porn, turning to sugar and alcohol to disconnect, and pretty much anything we turn to when we “reach our limit” and need some type of pseudo-comfort.

What do you turn to after a long day at the office or a painful interaction? Some of our BEEPS are more socially acceptable than others. This reminds me of the time my relational circuit went off—and I tried to eat a dozen donuts.

### A DOZEN DONUTS

Jen drove me to the hospital for a procedure where I was given medicine to put me in a twilight phase so I wouldn’t remember the procedure. Because I had to fast the previous day, I was hungry. *Really hungry*. On the drive to the hos-

pital we passed all my favorite restaurants. After the procedure, I was pretty out of it. The doctor gave clear instructions: *Whatever you do, avoid acidic and fatty food!* In the moment, this advice seemed reasonable . . . until we drove by all my favorite food places.

I first asked Jen to drive by one particular fast-food restaurant where I ordered a large two-cheeseburger meal, large fries, and large soft drink—along with a ten-piece chicken nugget meal. Then, I asked Jen to drive to my favorite donut place, where I ordered a dozen donuts. My loving wife tried to stop this second (or third) bad decision, but my cravings were high and my relational circuit was offline. Jen planned to eat one of my dozen donuts for herself, which is totally reasonable. However, once I found this out, while still in line at the drive-through, I refused to share my dozen donuts with her! I even threatened to get out of the car and place the order myself at the window. I was way offline. These responses were outside of my character.

Less than an hour later, my senses returned to me and I looked at all the empty food wrappers in the car. By this point I was feeling sick. I said to Jen, “Dear, why did you let me eat all this food?” She turned and said, “*Let you?* Oh, let me tell you what you did!” and I heard a detailed account of what happens when nonrelational Chris takes over. It was not pretty. I gave myself a stomachache and put my wife through a stressful ordeal.

The relational circuit, a type of a circuit breaker in your

brain, is what keeps you anchored to make good and wise decisions for your health. Once the circuit shuts down, the results are not pretty in how we care for ourselves and how we treat others. Decisions can bring unwanted consequences. Take my advice: avoid big decisions, “impulse buys,” or indulging in junk food when your relational circuit goes off.

### **JOY TO BOUNCE BACK**

Everyone is going to go offline, like I did, every now and then. But joy gives us strength. This strength grows much-needed resiliency so we resist cravings and bounce back after difficulties.<sup>18</sup> I can remember how hard it was to transition from college into full-time ministry after giving up my partying ways. I started a new job in a new state with no friends and no driver’s license. I felt lost! Thankfully, my colleagues and the new community of people I met through the recovery center provided opportunities to grow joy. I felt like I belonged. Eventually, I became a pastoral counselor. I gained my master’s degree and started pastoring, writing, and speaking. I went from feeling lost to found; I had a new purpose for life. Joy is a game-changer.

By building joy, we increase emotional capacity, our ability to handle hard stuff. We can even say joy “trauma-proofs” people, particularly our children, so people gain necessary skills to recover instead of staying stuck in painful emotions. Joy is a smile away.

While people may not have the language for the Joy Switch or the relational circuit, those who know us can see and feel the difference when our relational brain is operational or offline. Our face, voice, body language, words, and priorities give it away. The canvas of our body displays clear signals of a relational shutdown. Many of us rage, bite, snap, grump, and blast others with our words and emotions. Some of us are just plain mean in this state. Rigidity takes over. Our face and voice radiate anger, fear, or some other negative emotion. We witness these shifts in ourselves and in others. We can feel a pit form in our stomachs when someone walks through the door and we see their relational circuit is offline.

Sometimes enemy mode is cold and calculating, as we will see in chapter 2. Some of us conceal our distress. We smile on the outside while we rage, worry, or “stew” on the inside. Do you know what you show on your face when you are relationally offline?

Fixing the underlying issues that shut down our relational circuit will improve how well we stay connected during hardship and strain. Sometimes we go offline because unresolved pain is stirred up from something in the present, which reminds us of pain from our past. Other times fatigue, physical pain, or low blood sugar cause a relational shutdown. We will explore more reasons shutdowns occur in chapter 4.

## REPAIRING THE DISRUPTION: MEET CARS

It is worth noting, the goal is *not* to avoid a relational shutdown. Rather, we want to *recognize, then repair the disruption of our brain's relational circuit*. Learning to use the Joy Switch habits for the relational circuit help us return to relational mode faster. We will explore these useful habits in chapter 3, but the habits to activate the Joy Switch are what I call *CARS* solutions. We use *Connection* to connect with people, thoughts, and situations that stabilize us, *Appreciation* to remember gifts that make us smile, *Rest* to pause and catch our breath, and *Shalom My Body* exercises to calm our mind and body. Using the Joy Switch steps help us shift from shutdown mode back into relational mode. Learning to return to relational mode quickly is what leads to a more accurate reflection of the person we want to be.

With practice, we come up with the language to tell others our relational engine is malfunctioning—we are on the verge of a relational blackout. We utilize the Joy Switch by practicing the habits and doing the things that help us calm and get relational again. As we explore in the next chapter, we can use a wide range of options to activate a fading relational circuit. Some of us need a refreshing stroll out in the fresh air. A chance to spend time in nature, quiet and rest, playing with a pet, practicing gratitude and appreciation, listening to music, talking to a friend, a warm cup of tea, and more can improve the quality of our interactions and help us “stay in the moment.”

This is good news! We can learn to activate the full range of our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual capacities needed to stay ourselves in good times and bad.

### THE JOURNEY BEFORE US

The single most important relational habit we can develop is *learning to live with the brain's relational circuit engaged*. Few things are more rewarding than seeing changes in yourself where you relationally thrive instead of falling out of relational mode and missing opportunities for joy. Children feel closer to parents. Marriages have more joy. People feel loved.

Going forward, I will guide you to maximize your relational circuit and remove roadblocks to the switched-on life. You can elevate key practices that activate your relational superpowers.

And now we turn to some simple exercises to activate your brain's relational engine.



## Chapter 1 Practice

### EXERCISE 1: YOUR CLEAREST EXAMPLES

The goal is to find clear examples when you were in relational mode and when you fell out. With practice, you better notice times you are in or out of relational mode. Use a journal or your phone to write out thoughts.

1. Think about a time you were clearly in relational mode; you were your *fully engaged self*. Maybe it was a time you were on vacation, during a weekend outing, etc.
  - a. What do you see in your:
    - i. Thoughts:
    - ii. Feelings:
    - iii. Responses:
  
2. Now, think about a time you fell out of relational mode and it is obvious you were *relationally offline*.
  - a. What do you see in your:
    - i. Thoughts:
    - ii. Feelings:
    - iii. Responses:

3. What do the people around you see or hear when you are in relational mode versus times you fall out?
  - a. Your words:
  - b. Your actions:
  - c. Your face and body:

### **EXERCISE 2: READY, SET, GET RELATIONAL**

Below are additional questions for reflection. You will go deeper in this exercise if you find a friend or family member to share your thoughts.

1. What kinds of things activate your brain's relational circuit so you are ready for joy?
  - a. Example: *Taking walks outside help me feel relational.*
2. What kinds of things set you off and turn off your brain's relational circuit?
  - a. Example: *Talking about finances with my spouse, feeling tired, hungry, disappointed, etc.*
3. If you took a guess, how much time do you spend in relational mode in a given day? Check what best applies. Invite your family to take a guess as well.
  - a. Note: *Staying in relational mode does not mean you have to interact every waking moment. It means you are relationally anchored in joy and peace, ready to interact if the opportunity arises.*

- 0-25% of my day is spent in relational mode
- 25-50% of my day is spent in relational mode
- 50-75% of my day is spent in relational mode
- 75-100% of my day is spent in relational mode

4. What changes, tweaks, or adjustments could possibly improve the above assessment?

a. Example: *If I went to bed earlier, I would feel more rested and ready to relationally engage people . . .*

5. Glad-to-be-together joy helps us stay relational. Where are the sources of relational joy in your life?

a. Make a list in your phone or journal.

b. Now, take 3–5 minutes to remember special moments where you felt relational joy with others. Notice how you feel after thinking about these memories.

i. You can set a timer on your phone.

### **EXERCISE 3: NOTICING THE RELATIONAL CIRCUIT IN MY NETWORK**

We can learn to notice people in our network who excel at living relationally. Here is a good opportunity to interact with people about your observation on *their ability to stay relational*. A direct benefit here is you can identify people who stay relational, you can express appreciation for them, and you gain wisdom from their experience.

1. Identify 3 or more people who appear to be good examples of living relationally.
  
2. What qualities do you see and admire in each person? Write in your phone or a journal what you enjoy about each person.
  
3. Make it a point to have a conversation or interaction with each person. Express your appreciation for what you observe. If time allows, invite these people to share how they learned to stay relational. Notice if any patterns emerge.
  - a. Were family members or friends involved in demonstrating how to live relationally?
  - b. Invite each person to share a time they handled hardship well by staying relational.

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