

## **Advance Praise for *Ask This Book a Question***

“Everyone should read this magical book! Viewing our questions—from trivial to challenging—through the prism of Vicki’s delightfully wise stories creates a constellation of insights that will change the way you navigate your inner world.”

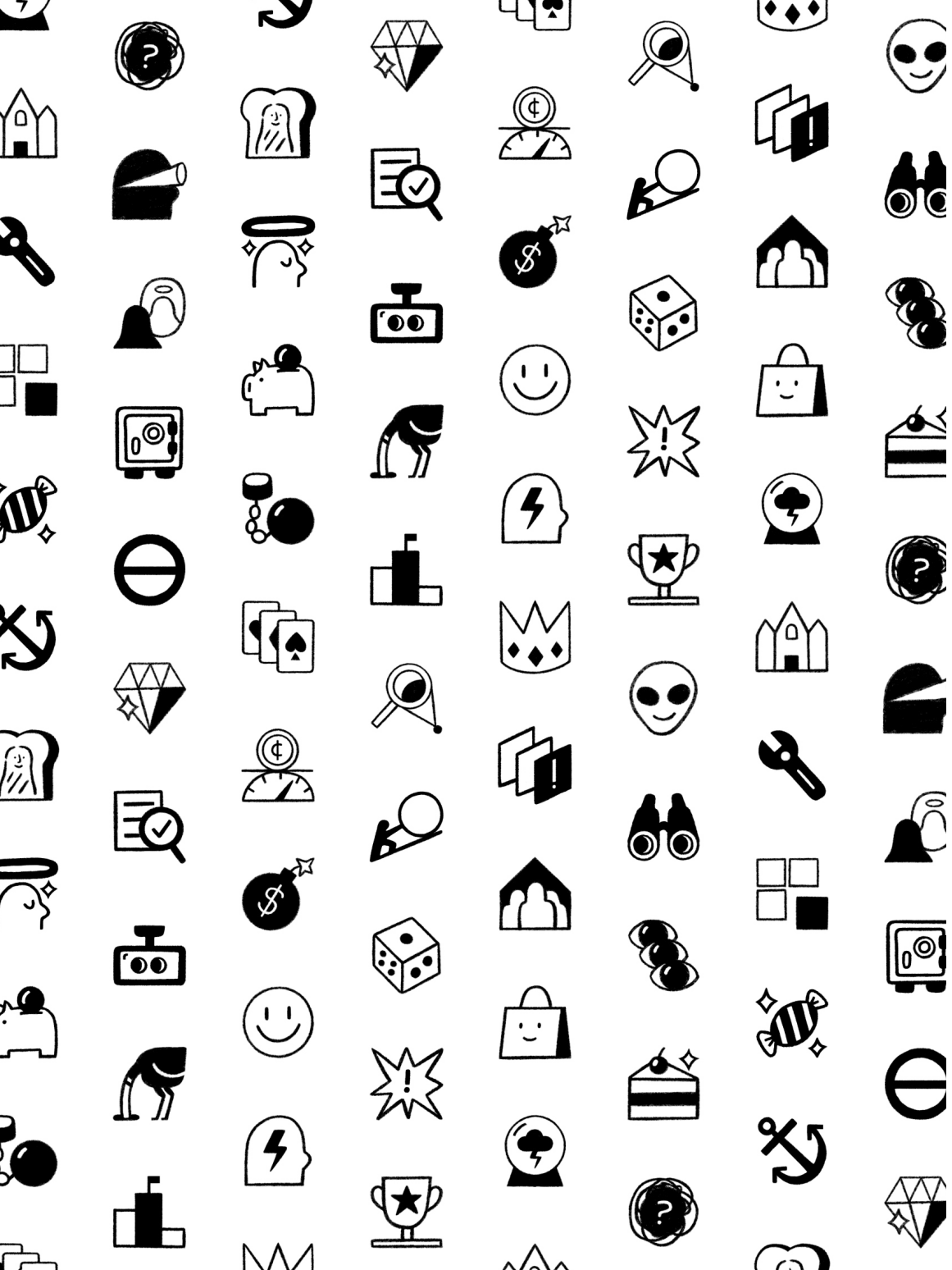
—Buster Benson, author of *Why Are We Yelling?*

“In an age of content overload, we need better questions. Vicki Tan’s excellent *Ask This Book a Question* poses just the right ones.”

—Yancey Strickler, author and cofounder of Metalabel,  
Kickstarter, and The Creative Independent

“In *Ask This Book a Question*, Vicki Tan turns decision-making into an interactive, self-reflective journey. This guide will help you navigate life’s uncertainties with clarity and curiosity.”

—Nir Eyal, author of *Hooked* and *Indistractable*



# Ask This Book a Question

An Interactive Journey to Find Wisdom  
for Life's Big and Little Decisions

Written and illustrated by

**Vicki Tan**



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For my family

In loving memory,  
Jack 傳捷 Tan

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There are years that ask questions  
and years that answer.

—Zora Neale Hurston,  
*Their Eyes Were Watching God*

# Preface



Imagine wandering into a secondhand store in your favorite city, nestled on a quaint street across from a bakery known for its perfectly crumbly currant scones. As you navigate the shop's labyrinthine atrium, squeezing past crowded shelves in narrow aisles, your hand traces ornate frames, vintage typewriters, and old clocks frozen in time.

Tucked away in the back, an item piques your curiosity: a Magic 8 Ball. From a bygone era when people sought answers from the mystical, the one you hold in your hands is foggy with age, yet it possesses the same allure as those you remember. Instinctively, you do what countless others have done before you. You give it a shake and ask it your questions—everything from the profound to the ordinary.

But when you turn over this Magic 8 Ball for the answer, it offers you something different from the familiar responses you've come to expect—the traditional “yes,” “outlook not so good,” or “ask again later.” Instead, its prompts encourage you along a journey of self-discovery, off your usual paths and through exciting, unmarked territory to help you find what you've been looking for.



This book is designed to be a little like that unusual Magic 8 Ball. Within these pages, you'll find a space to bring your questions and uncertainties, and through exploring them, you'll uncover far more than simple answers. Grounded in the science of cognitive biases and behavioral change, this book aims to help you find a new kind of wisdom—a deeper understanding of yourself that empowers you to approach life's most important decisions with confidence and clarity. It will help you become your own Magic 8 Ball.

# Introduction

Each day, every one of us makes countless decisions. There are the daily, mundane choices you make based on your mood and circumstance: what to have for lunch, who to hang out with, what to do over the weekend. And then there are the bigger, more profound questions that you might mull over for years: how to be happy, how to overcome a fear, how to love.

The sum of different choices can bring you to life-changing decisions that serve as crossroads: whether to quit a job, whether to make a big move, whether to remain in a relationship. Every decision you make contributes to the larger narrative of who you are and who you're becoming.

The list of questions is infinite. There are decisions to make about work: how to balance the practical necessities of earning a living with the desire to find work that aligns with your values and passions. Questions about cultivating relationships: with family, friends, and romantic partners. Choices to make in your daily life: about your home, your health, your community. Not-yet-questions that are still unformed thoughts about your inner self: reflecting on your emotions, your values. Curiosity

about the forces outside you that influence all this: chance and purpose and luck.

As we move through life, we naturally develop our own unique approaches for decision-making. These strategies fall along a vast spectrum. Some of us lean toward the objective, arming ourselves with the structure of lists and frameworks, breaking down each choice into its constituent parts. Others favor a more intuitive approach, talking with family and friends, applying wisdom learned from adages, and going by feel. And yet, our affinity toward one way or the other isn't static; we may oscillate between these approaches, shifting and adapting to the specific challenges we face, informed by the successes and failures of our past.



Paradoxically, we tend to apply more rigorous analysis to smaller, less consequential decisions, while relying on a loose calculus of gut feeling and advice for the most significant choices in our lives. We may agonize over which brand of electric toothbrush to buy, while making life-altering decisions about careers or relationships based on a hunch or a friend's opinion. We then may ruminate, second-guess ourselves, and worry over whether we've made the absolute best choice.

The truth is, most of us don't have a clear understanding of how to make decisions that genuinely align with our true wants and desires. Without a deeper grasp of what we're consciously choosing or passively surrendering to, we may find ourselves wondering, "How did I get here?" This realization is what inspired me to write this book.



My fascination with decision-making began during my university years when I discovered behavioral science. Unlike the objective lens of life science that I had originally planned to study, this branch of psychology felt more like a window into the subjective mysteries of the world.

After graduating, I started my career in research, working in academic hospitals at the University of California San Diego, my alma mater, as well as the University of California San Francisco and Stanford University. While spending time with patients was deeply fulfilling, I struggled with the lack of creativity inherent in my role. Conducting research demanded someone obsessed with consistency and rigorous detail, but my mind yearned for the stratosphere above, in the unconstrained space where imagination thrived. I wanted to be the one dreaming up novel ideas and uncovering better ways of doing things.

During this period of uncertainty, I sent out hundreds of applications like little directionless paper airplanes, each a hopeful message to the universe for jobs I wasn't quite qualified for. As if in response, a serendipitous opportunity at a large tech company presented itself—a three-month contract on an organizational psychology research team focused on finding creative, evidence-based methods to reduce bias in hiring. Despite the risk of leaving my full-time job during the recession of the early 2000s, the glimmer of opportunity was too enticing for me to pass up, a perfect alignment of the stars for my meandering career.

Tech proved to be the ideal industry for a dreamer like me, with years of pent-up ambition ready to burst forth. Working at this company offered sprawling, colorful campuses designed

for play, seemingly endless extracurriculars to stimulate peripheral talents, and, most notably, its “20% Time” program. (This initiative encouraged employees to dedicate one day a week to a personal project of their choosing, with the only requirement being its potential benefit to the company.) My ideal scenario: designated curiosity-building time.

The gamble paid off. When I became a full-time employee, for the first time in my life I had the support of an incredibly smart manager who understood the value of uncovering and deepening our strengths. With her support, surrounded by a company full of talented designers to learn from, this is how I became a self-taught designer.

They say if you give a mouse a cookie, she’s going to ask for a glass of milk. In that moment, I was very much that mouse who had gotten a taste of design—I wanted so much more.



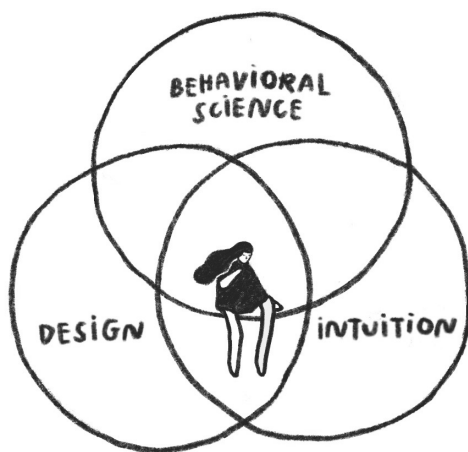
As I transitioned from that big tech company to smaller startups for larger opportunities, I discovered that behavioral science and design were beautiful complements to each other—form and function coming together—and a natural extension of how my mind worked. In a sea of aspiring designers, this unique behavioral perspective became my defining differentiator, shaping my career path in unexpected ways and bringing me opportunities I couldn’t have imagined back then (like writing this book!).

Product design offered the perfect canvas for blending the colors of human behavior with creative problem-solving. Each

project became a creative challenge, inviting me to apply behavioral science principles in innovative ways.

One of the most rewarding examples of this was my work on a meditation app. Mindfulness, as many of us know, can be a daunting skill to master. It's easy to feel discouraged when our minds inevitably wander or when we struggle to find the time to practice during our busy days. By integrating habit anchors and motivational triggers into the app's onboarding process, I created a gentler way to ease new meditators into their meditation journey.

At another company, I faced the challenge of helping people build trust in a concept that was, at the time, quite novel: ride-sharing. How could we encourage people to get into a stranger's car with confidence and ease? The key was shifting the mental models that people had about sharing rides. By designing interfaces that felt familiar and intuitive, and by communicating information in a way that resonated with their existing beliefs, we were able to foster a sense of trust and belonging that transcended the screen.



Since then, each of my professional experiences has been an experiment in blending behavioral science and design in different ways that deeply resonate with people. Now, I'm excited to channel this art and science of decision-making into this book. I'm re-framing behavioral science through the lens of design thinking, making it more accessible and relatable to your everyday life. My goal is to offer you intuitive tools that will help you navigate life's choices with greater clarity and confidence.



We'll begin by exploring one of the most fascinating core concepts in this field, cognitive biases, and how they subtly yet powerfully shape our decisions every day.

If you've read anything about decision-making, you're likely familiar with the concept of cognitive biases—those mental shortcuts that can invisibly shape our behaviors and decisions. Often, these biases are stereotyped as mere psychological traps, leading us astray and clouding our judgment. However, the approach I offer in this book isn't simply about eliminating these biases—an impossible task, really—but about seeing them in a new light. Embracing this potential is an exercise not in letting the worst aspect of something be the crescendo, but rather in seeing what else might emerge.

Research on motivation shows that viewing these tendencies as essential parts of ourselves, with both bright and dark aspects, allows us to be less at odds with them and better equipped to navigate their influence. In this way, my exploration of these biases extends beyond their traditional scientific definitions.



While grounded in research, I've taken creative liberty, through storytelling and open-ended framing, to make these concepts more relatable.

At their core, biases are mental shortcuts that we've developed to help us make sense of the world. They're the survival instincts that help us spot patterns, navigate uncertainty, and handle complexity. These cognitive strategies help us learn from the past, adapt to the present, and prepare for the future. By simplifying the vast information we encounter daily, these mental models help us focus, prioritize, and make decisive choices. The key is understanding when to challenge our instincts and when to trust our gut.

While cognitive biases can be useful, overreliance on them can lead to negative cycles, unfair judgments, and limited growth. Developing an awareness of this dichotomy will help you develop the intuition to make choices that align with your values, embracing both sides of yourself to see what new insights might emerge.



So, when you find yourself with a stubborn decision or in a challenging situation—ask this book a question. Ask the hopeful, challenging, and quiet queries you've held on to, and then learn

how to move forward with them in a deeper way. By gaining insight into how your mind perceives and makes judgments about the world, you can start to connect with yourself to see what you're truly choosing.

Just like that unusual Magic 8 Ball you discovered in the quaint shop, this book will be your guide as you navigate life's uncertainties. With each question you ask and each page you turn, you'll develop the wisdom within yourself. This intuition will be your guide to help you approach your most important decisions with clarity and confidence.

# How to Use This Book

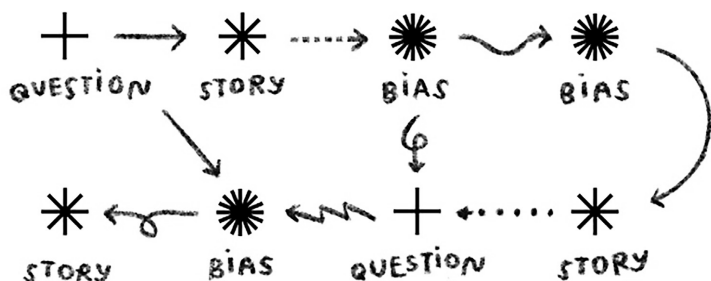
What kinds of questions can you ask of this book? The best ones are those you might ask an advice column or even a fortune teller. I can't help with factual queries you'd ask Google, or predictive questions about the weather or winning lottery numbers—if only! What I want are your deep life questions that you discuss with your closest friends and that fill the pages of your journal.



Each question in this book will lead you to a personal story, a fable crafted to share my favorite life lessons. These narratives serve as mnemonic devices, helping you understand behavioral science concepts in a relatable, human way. Throughout each story, you'll find cognitive biases highlighted, revealing how they can influence your choices and perceptions in subtle ways.

After each story, you can learn about each of these biases in more depth by flipping to their page in the last section of the book.

(Some questions will also lead directly to a bias.) Cognitive biases are like lenses that color our perception and decision-making. Just as a lens can bring things into focus or distort our vision, biases can have both positive and negative effects on our choices. In the “light” and “shadow” sections, which explore the positive and negative aspects of each bias, you’ll discover how these mental shortcuts can look in different situations, and how they can either sharpen our judgment or lead us astray. I’ve also included targeted questions, journaling prompts, and real-life examples to teach you about the complex interplay of emotions, intuition, and reasoning that underlies your choices, empowering you to navigate life’s challenges with greater clarity and intention.



The navigation in this book is designed to be organic and intuitive, allowing you to explore the content in a way that feels natural and engaging. The questions in the first part of the book act as signposts, guiding you toward the stories and biases that resonate most with your current situation and state of mind. If you’re the type of reader who prefers a more structured or linear approach, you can of course read the book from beginning to end. This path may feel more like wandering through a museum, each chapter a self-contained exhibit inviting you to explore a particular theme.

As you explore the book, allow yourself to be guided by your curiosity. This is your journey, and the path you take will be distinctly your own. Trust that the questions and stories that draw your attention are the ones that hold the most valuable lessons for you in this moment.



To get the most out of your reading experience:

- Keep a journal or digital notes to jot down your thoughts, reflections, and questions.
- Actively engage with the material by underlining passages that resonate with you, responding to prompts, and doodling your feelings.
- When new questions emerge, use the bias pages as a quick reference guide.

Once you've finished the book, keep it close at hand, on your coffee table as a visual totem to remind you of what you've learned. Revisit these pages as your life situations change, forging meaningful connections between the book's insights and your own experiences.

Ultimately, my hope is that this book will be a catalyst for personal growth and discovery. Embrace the detours, the aha moments, and the questions that arise along the way—they are all essential parts of your unique path.



# + QUESTIONS +

**Y**our journey begins with a question—a puzzling thought, a persistent challenge, or a desire for clarity. Use these visual prompts as an intuitive navigation tool, to encourage a more organic approach to explore your question from new angles.

Think of your question as the starting point of an adventure—one that invites you to wander off the usual paths, discover hidden connections, and embrace obstacles. Follow the tangents that capture your interest, even if they lead you in unexpected directions. At this stage, your only goal is to expand your perspective, and find where to go next.

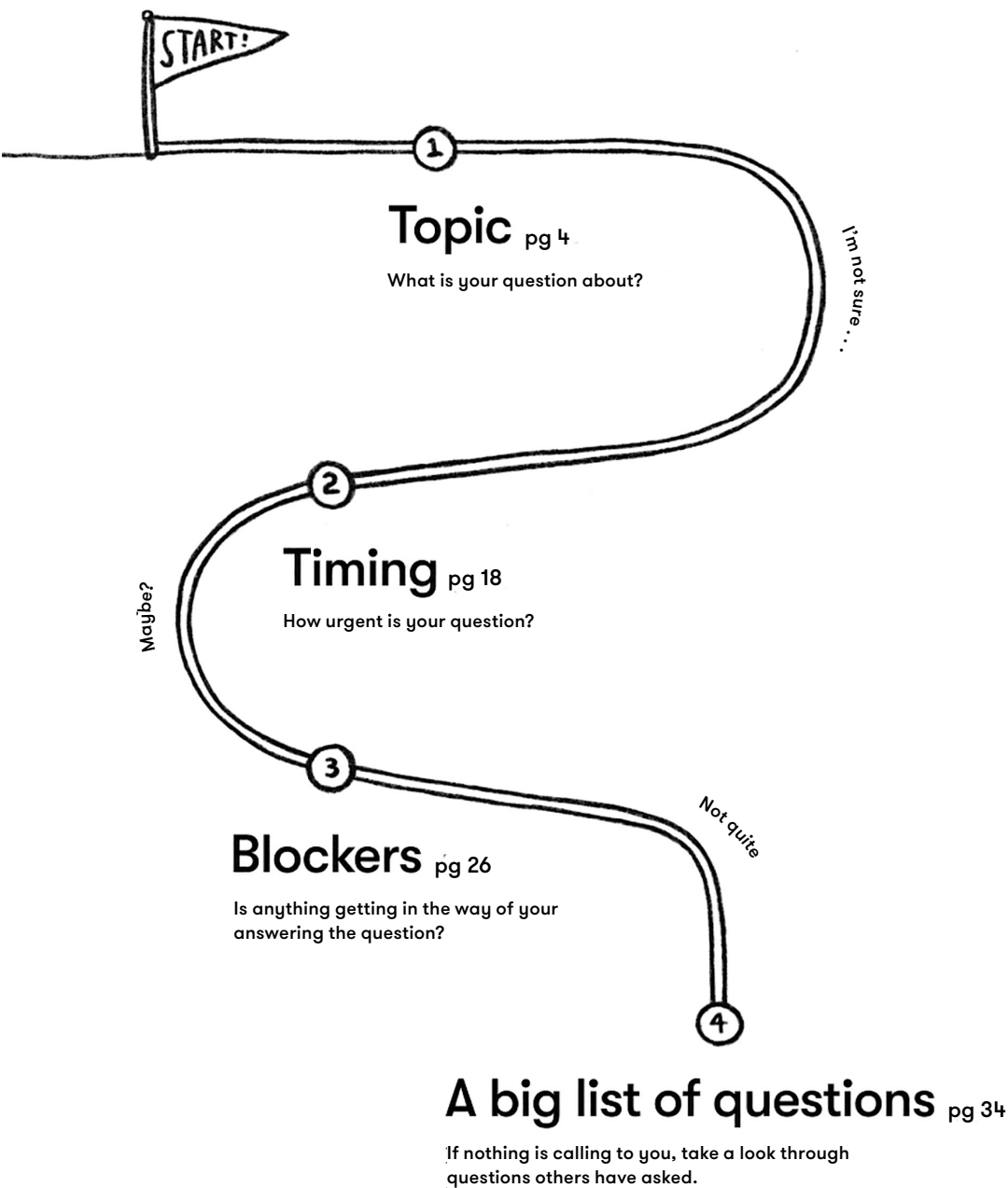
By approaching your question from different vantage points, you may uncover the underlying reasons why it has been so challenging for you. Let go of the expectation of quick answers. You might be surprised by what happens when you allow yourself to get a little lost.

Remember, this is a dynamic, interactive experience. Feel free to jump around, linger on prompts that resonate with you, and revisit them as your understanding evolves. Trust your intuition, and let your curiosity be your guide.

# Think of a question...



It should be something that's been calling to you. Maybe it's been hard to grasp or you've been caught in indecision. If multiple questions come to mind, start with one and come back to the others later. (If you don't have a question yet, skip to number 4.)



# 1. Topic

## What is your question about?

If you've picked up this book with a burning question on your mind, start by considering whether it falls under one of these broad yet essential categories: Everyday Life, Health, Relationships, Work, Quality Time, or Existential.

While not an exhaustive list, these high-level areas can serve as a starting point for your exploration. As you explore the following visuals, allow yourself to be drawn into the interconnectedness of these themes.

