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You Need

RELATIONSHIP SKILLS



Stephanie Bain

Inclusive
+ Affirming
Psychotherapy

LOVE

You Need

RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

A guided workbook focused on
improving your relationships



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THE NAUGHTY LIST

A list of things to AVOID
in your relationships



- Yell
- Storm out or leave without warning
- Break up or allude to breaking up mid-fight
- Fight over text or in the car
- Debate facts ("no, what you said was...")
- Deflect ("you also...")
- Discuss two things at once--there is time for your stuff, too
- Argue for more than 30 minutes (3-15 minutes is better)
- Give conditional apologies ("sorry, but")
- Focus on explaining why you did something versus the impact and feelings of your partner when apologizing
- Criticize, demean, or name-call your partner



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MY NAUGHTY LIST



What relational behaviors do you aspire to changing?



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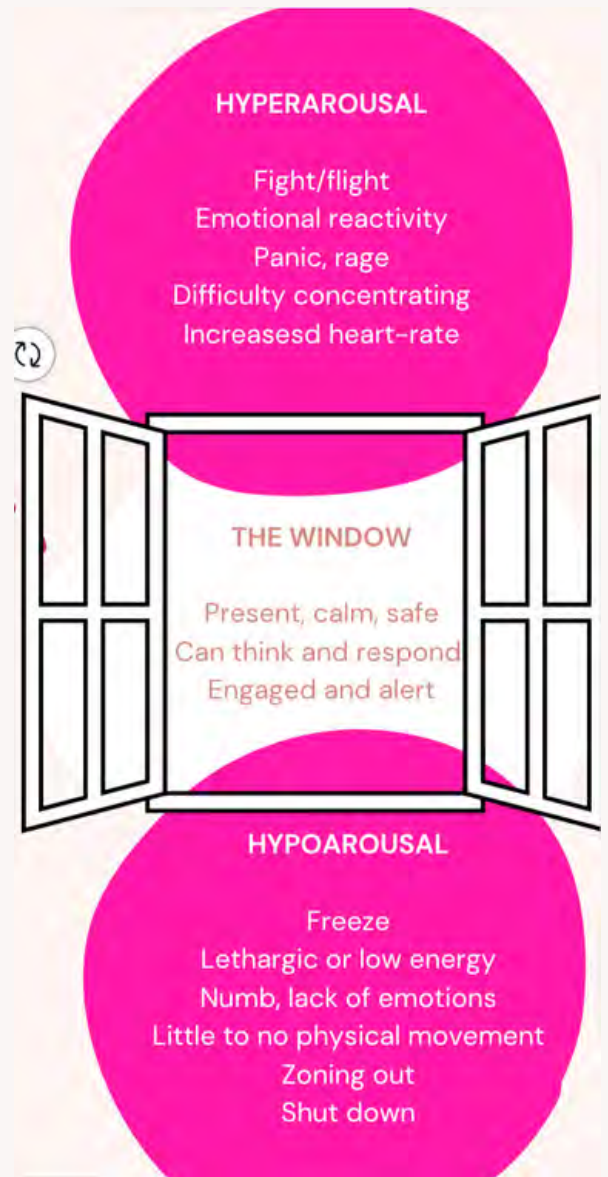
WINDOW OF TOLERANCE



The window of tolerance refers to the optimal range of emotional and physiological arousal that a person can manage effectively. When discussing important things with partners, friends, or family, you should be within your window. When a person's level of arousal is within this optimal range, they are better able to think clearly, regulate their emotions, and engage in adaptive behaviors. Once you exit your window, you need to take a break, slow down, or shift gears.

Signs I'm exiting my window of tolerance:

Signs my partner is:



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RELATIONSHIP SKILLS TRIGGERS



Trauma triggers are specific stimuli that can cause a person who has experienced trauma to re-experience the traumatic event. These triggers can be physical, emotional, or environmental, and may include sights, sounds, smells, or feelings that are associated with the original traumatic event. Examples of trauma triggers include a loud noise or a specific smell that reminds a person of a traumatic event that occurred in a particular location. They can also include a certain type of behavior, a certain way of speaking, being rejected, being disrespected, and feeling unimportant. Triggers can vary from person to person and may not always be obvious or predictable.

LEVEL 10 RELATIONSHIP SKILL: SELF-REFLECTION

It is so important to be able to self-reflect and be aware that what you are responding to in your relationship...isn't just about your relationship.



My triggers:

A large, rounded rectangular area with a light pink background and a dashed pink border, intended for writing about personal triggers.

My partner's:

A large, rounded rectangular area with a light pink background and a dashed pink border, intended for writing about a partner's triggers.



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CULTURE OF APPRECIATION

Relationships can take work, but life is hard enough. Make your relationship joyful and nourishing! Celebrate the small things--surviving a difficult meeting, your partner unloading the dishwasher...let your partner know what specifically you love about them--their jokes, their kindness... Don't make them guess how you feel about them. Feeling appreciated and expressing appreciation creates a supportive and resilient culture in your relationship.



INVESTING IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP:

- Expressing gratitude about specific things
- Compliments and celebration
- Regular, intentional one-on-one time
- Relationship check-ins
- Small and large gestures
- Knowing what your partner needs to feel cared for and doing that



A full emotional "bank account" leads to decreased tension, increased ability to resolve conflicts, and increased intimacy.



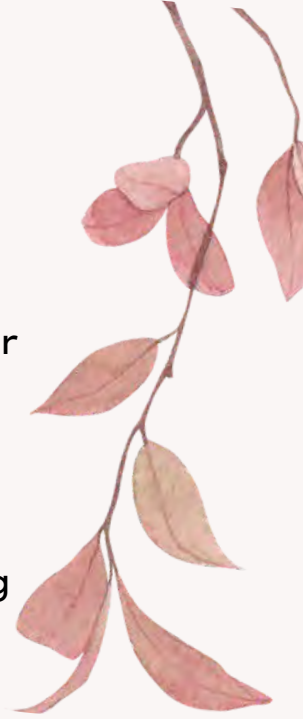
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BIDS FOR CONNECTION

A bid for connection refers to any attempt, either verbal or nonverbal, made by one partner to seek attention, affection, or support from the other partner. Bids can take various forms, such as asking a question, making a comment, offering physical touch, or even using humor.

Research at The Gottman Institute has shown that couples who consistently turn towards each other's bids tend to have more satisfying and enduring relationships. These positive interactions create a sense of emotional connection, trust, and support. On the other hand, relationships where partners frequently turn away or turn against bids are more likely to experience conflict, dissatisfaction, and a breakdown of intimacy over time.



My bids:

My partner's:





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ATTACHMENT STYLES



All humans have an innate need for close, secure relationships, and the way we form and maintain these relationships is influenced by our early experiences of attachment.

When our early attachment needs were not met, it can lead to insecure attachment patterns and negative effects on our emotional and social functioning. Both avoidant and anxious attachment are parts of unconscious strategies to get our needs met without opening ourselves to pain.





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ATTACHMENT STYLES

Secure - comfortable with intimacy and feel secure in their relationships. They are able to rely on others and feel comfortable asking for help when needed. They have a positive view of themselves and their partners and are generally trusting and empathetic. They value emotional closeness and are able to communicate their needs effectively.

Ok, stop bragging.

Anxious Preoccupied- worry about their relationships and are preoccupied with thoughts of rejection or abandonment. They may seek a lot of reassurance from their partners and feel anxious when their partner is not available. They tend to have a negative view of themselves and a positive view of their partner. They may also struggle with communication and have difficulty expressing their needs clearly.



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ATTACHMENT STYLES



Avoidant Dismissive- tend to avoid emotional closeness and may feel uncomfortable with intimacy. They may prioritize independence and self-reliance and may have difficulty trusting others. They often have a positive view of themselves and a negative view of their partner. They may also struggle with emotional expression and may be dismissive of their own or others' emotions.

Fearful Avoidant - a mixture of anxious and avoidant traits. They may want intimacy but feel uncomfortable with it at the same time, due to a fear of rejection or abandonment. They may struggle with trust and have a negative view of themselves and their partners. They may also have difficulty communicating their emotions and needs.



My attachment style:

My partner's:

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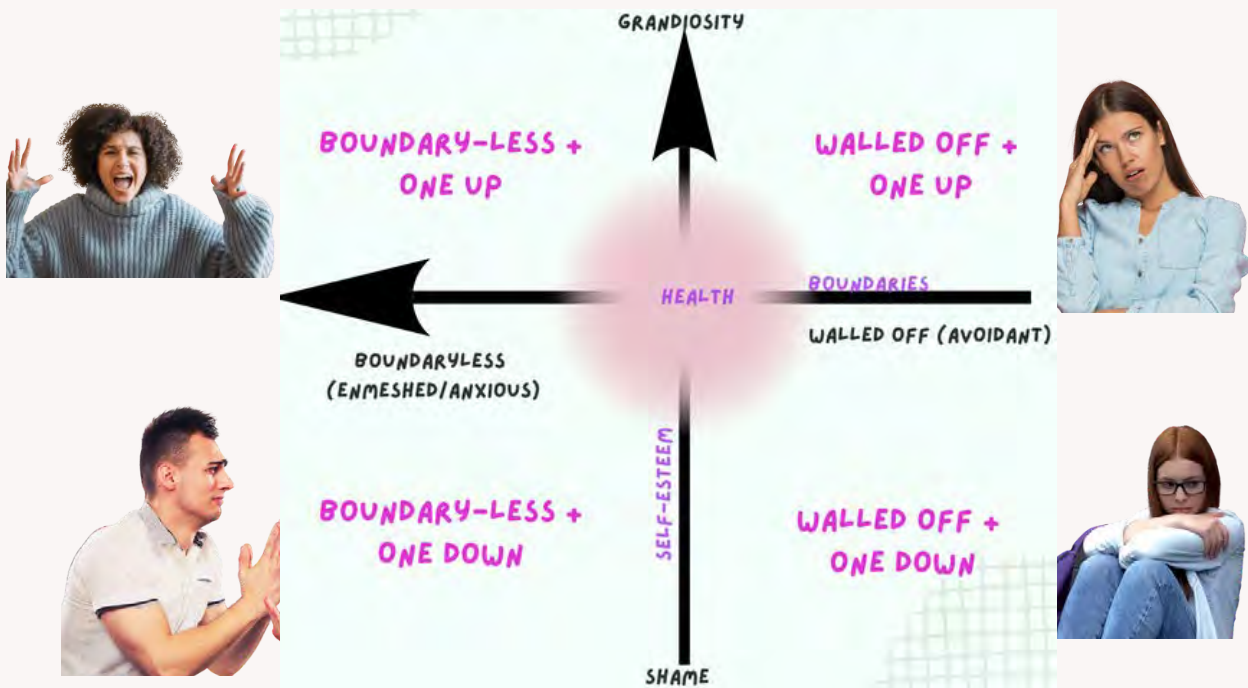
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THE RELATIONSHIP GRID



The Relationship Grid developed by Terry Real can be helpful to identify the strategies you use when stressed or in conflict. Do you go to criticism? Do you go to shame? Do you tend toward removing yourself from connection? Do you become more "needy"?

These positions often relate to our past experiences in relationships. Finding our way to our wise adult is a key skill for healthy, connected, intimate relationships.

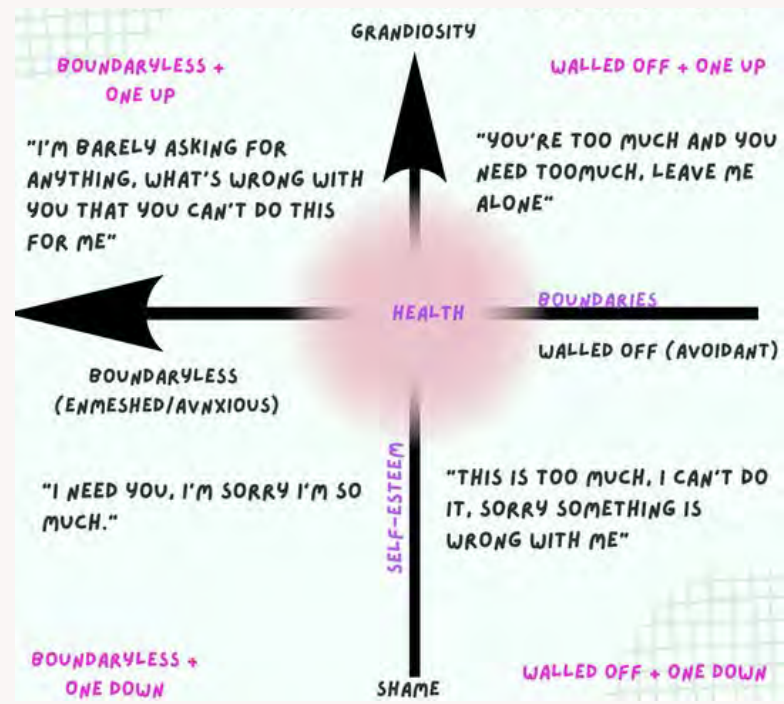
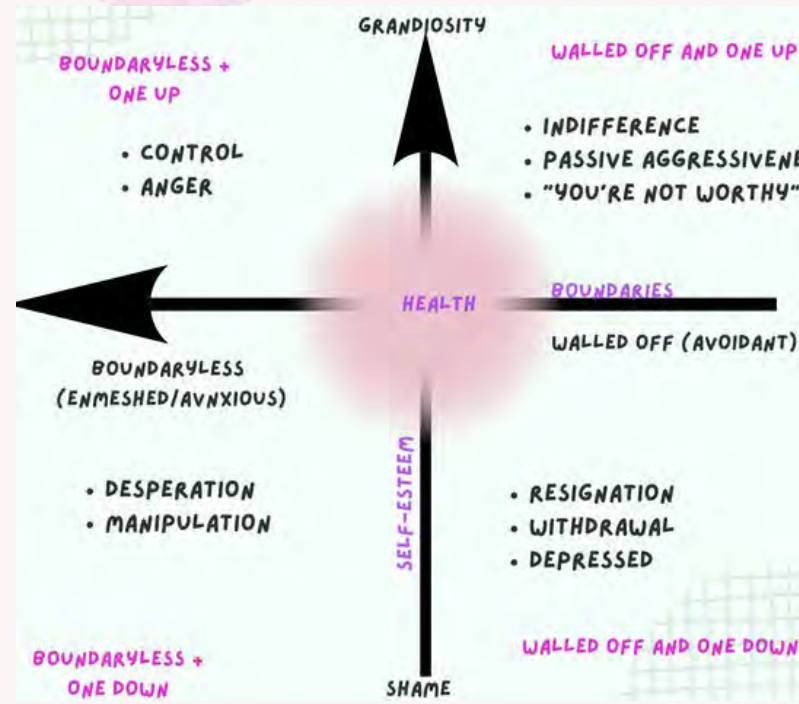


ONE UP POSITION = I AM BETTER THAN OTHERS
 ONE DOWN POSITION = OTHERS ARE BETTER THAN ME
 BOUNDARY-LESS = COME CLOSE AT ANY COST
 WALLED OFF = GET AWAY FROM ME

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RELATIONSHIP GRID: TACTICS AND NARRATIVES



Where do you and your partner land?

When my partner is upset with me I land:

When I'm upset with my partner I land:

When my partner is upset with me, my partner lands:

When I'm upset with my partner, they land:



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RELATIONSHIP SKILLS PURSUER / WITHDRAWER

The pursuer-withdrawer dynamic is a common relationship pattern. In this dynamic, one partner (the pursuer) tends to seek emotional connection and wants to discuss issues in the relationship, while the other partner (the withdrawer) tends to withdraw or avoid these conversations.

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PROFESSIONAL STUNT ACTORS,
PLEASE DO NOT ATTEMPT THE
PURSUER/WITHDRAWER TANGO



The pursuer often feels frustrated and alone in the relationship, while the withdrawer feels overwhelmed and needs space to process their thoughts and emotions. This can create a cycle where the pursuer becomes more demanding or critical, which causes the withdrawer to withdraw even further, which then causes the pursuer to become even more demanding.

Withdrawers should:

- Regulate their nervous system
- Learn to be less defensive
- Not avoid problems
- Tend to their partner
- Validate their partner's distress
- Affirm that they are "there for" their partner
- Plan dates and fun activities
- Compliment their partner
- Express gratitude for their partner
- Learn their partner's love language and speak it!

Pursuers should:

- Regulate their nervous system
- Avoid criticism
- Affirm their understanding of their partner's difficulty sticking through conflict
- Give partner space and time to plan, give compliments, respond to bids...withdrawers often move a bit slower
- Give positive feedback on what their partners are doing well
- Compliment their partner
- Express gratitude for their partner
- Learn their partner's love language and speak it!





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RELATIONSHIP SKILLS HELPED, HEARD, HUGGED

When our partners are in crisis, sad, or in distress, it is important we offer support--but what is supportive?

Before you jump into a supportive role, first ask...



Do you need to be

Helped

Heard

or

Hugged?



Based on Jancee Dunn's New York Times article



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RELATIONSHIP SKILLS HELPED, HEARD, HUGGED

Helped

HOW:

- Even when you have the green light to problem-solve, you need to first understand your loved one's perspective
- Strategize together the best way to approach the situation causing your partner distress

THE IMPACT:

- The experience of being on the same team can increase relationship satisfaction
- Your loved one doesn't feel alone in solving a problem
- Your loved one is supported in seeing multiple options and a different perspective

"Let's figure this out together"





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RELATIONSHIP SKILLS HELPED, HEARD, HUGGED

Heard

HOW:

- Use active listening skills to understand another person's experience and help them feel understood
- Empathize and validate your partner's emotional experience
- Cheerlead and encourage when appropriate
- Now is not the time to problem-solve or bring in your perspective

THE IMPACT:

- Active listening and presence can decrease defensiveness and the intensity of distress
- Feeling heard increases feelings of validation, decreases feelings of loneliness, and decreases stress



"Wow sounds awful"





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RELATIONSHIP SKILLS HELPED, HEARD, HUGGED

Hugged

HOW:

- A long open-hearted hug
- This one may seem simple, but comforting touch may look different depending on the person

THE IMPACT:

- Boosts oxytocin, the bonding hormone that decreases stress and increases feelings of well-being
- Calms your loved one, increases feelings of connectedness, decreases stress and loneliness, increases resilience in regulating and problem-solving



"I'm here, it's okay."





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THOUGHTS V. FEELINGS

Thoughts refer to cognitive processes that occur in our mind, such as perception, memory, attention, and reasoning. They are mental representations of ideas, concepts, beliefs, and judgments that we hold about ourselves, others, and the world around us. Examples of thoughts include "I need to finish this project," "She is kind," "The sky looks beautiful today," and "I am not good enough."

Feelings refer to the emotional responses we experience in response to different stimuli, situations, and events. They are subjective experiences that involve physiological changes, such as changes in heart rate, breathing, and hormone levels, as well as psychological changes, such as moods and affective states. Examples of feelings include happiness, sadness, anger, fear, excitement, and contentment.

Why is this important? Thoughts influence our feelings, and feelings influence our thoughts, but they are NOT the same. When we confuse thoughts with feelings, we may attribute cognitive interpretations to emotional states or vice versa.

Example: For instance, if you grew up in a family that values punctuality and you have a partner or friend who didn't, you may interpret lateness as communicating disrespect. You may FEEL disrespected, but it is important to consider your own beliefs, interpretations, and triggers in what is playing into the feelings. By taking accountability for your own part of the feeling experience, you move away from blame and are able to collaborate on ways you and your loved ones can make you feel prioritized, respected, safe, and secure.





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RELATIONSHIP SKILLS NEEDS V. CRITICISM

Need a change in your relationship? Need to state a need or a boundary? Want to complain? There's a way to do it to get better results!

Expressing positive needs switches criticism and complaining to asks. This is a superior method because 1) it's not about another person being bad or wrong, 2) it focuses on your feelings so it is less debatable, 3) it gives the other person less opportunity to be defensive and more opportunity to be empathetic, and 4) it empowers you to identify your needs and come up with ways to meet them!

Do not criticize the other person, this is not about them being bad (nuance time--sometimes certain behaviors are absolutely not okay), but rather about you have feelings and needs. The solid people in your life want to make you feel safe and secure if possible and within their boundaries!



AND IT
GOES LIKE
THIS...





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RELATIONSHIP SKILLS NEEDS V. CRITICISM

Check-in With Yourself

- What are you feeling?
- What is the need behind the feeling?
- Is it reasonable for your partner to meet that need?

Remember

- Your partner is not your enemy
- Take a deep breath first
- Be ready to listen to your partner, too

Communicate Positive Needs

I feel [feeling]
about [specific event/behavior]
and I need [positive need].

Communicate Positive Needs

"I would appreciate eye
contact and your attention
when we are speaking."

Versus "put down your phone when I'm talking
to you"

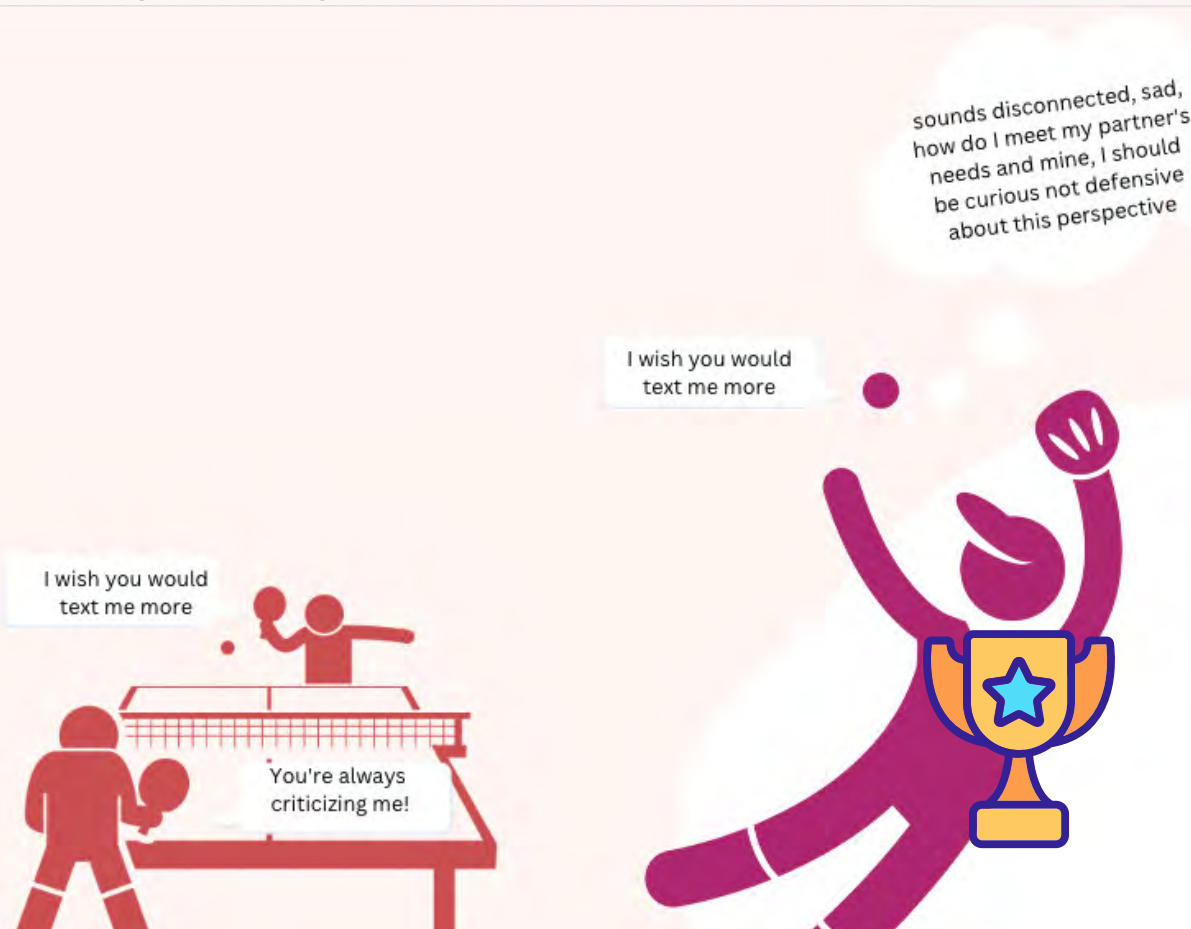




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RELATIONSHIP SKILLS CATCH V. PING PONG

When talking with your partner are you playing ping pong...or catch?



Based on the ideas from the Therapist Uncensored Podcast.

This simple metaphor can serve as a helpful reminder to keep you honest about whether you are doing active listening or not. Active listening allows us to truly understand the speaker's perspective, thoughts, and feelings. By giving our full attention and focusing on the speaker's words, tone, and body language, we can gain a deeper comprehension of their message. This understanding helps build stronger connections and promotes empathy. More on active listening next!



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ACTIVE LISTENING

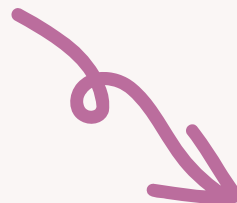
Active listening is simple in concept but at times, difficult to execute. Active listening is done with the intention of deeply understanding another person and helping another person you are fully present to hear about and understand their experience.

That means if you are multitasking, waiting to share your own experience, debating the facts, or ping-ponging you're not actively listening.

If you start experiencing dysregulation, becoming defensive or shameful, you may not be in a place for active listening. You may need to take a break and return when you are ready to hear and understand another person.



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ACTIVE LISTENING

Paraphrase

Learn to rephrase what the speaker is saying so you communicate understanding (and give an opportunity for clarification):

"I'm hearing you were hurt and you would prefer if I ___"

Open-Ended Questions

Learn to ask questions that increase your understanding in benefit of the speaker:

"What was your experience when I did __"
"So, you're saying you felt __, how can I better communicate? "

Verbal Affirmation

Learn to use short phrases like: skillfully

"uh huh"

"That makes sense"

"I understand"

Empathy

Learn to skillfully express empathy with phrases like:

"Do you need to be helped, heard, or hugged?"

"I'm so sorry you experienced that"

"How can I help?"

Non-Verbal Affirmations

Learn to skillfully include:

Nodding

Eye contact

Facial expressions

Avoiding distraction





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RELATIONSHIP SKILLS APOLOGIZING

Apologizing is a crucial relationship skill. The absolute first step to apologizing is demonstrating e m p a t h y. You need to understand your partner's experience and feelings.

Word of caution: Pay attention to your own shame. Many of us go to defend our goodness or sink into our fear of our badness versus hearing + attending to our partner. If you're focused on your own goodness or badness, you are not paying attention to your partner and may not be ready to have this conversation. Below is the 3-part apology developed by the Gottman Institute.

The 3-Part Apology

"I did X and I'm sorry (Y) and I vow to do better (Z)."

Just so we are clear, these are NOT good apologies:

"I'm sorry you feel that way"

"You misunderstood me, I..."

"I'm sorry, but"

"Well, I had to do that because you..."





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EXERCISE: ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

This exercise is designed to increase empathy and understanding and recall what you have learned about yourself and your partner in your relationship work.

THIS IS A GREAT OPPORTUNITY TO REVIEW SKILLS ALREADY COVERED:

- Regulating yourself and using box breathing (pg 4-5)
- Notice your triggers and consider your partners (pg 5)
- Think about how you and your partner make bids (pg 7)
- Distinguish between thoughts and feelings (pg 18)





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EXERCISE: ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

Part 1:

Bring to mind a difficult or uncomfortable situation you are having with your partner.

Write down your thoughts and feelings for a few minutes.

1. Describe the situation briefly from your perspective
2. What reactions happen in the situation? (Do you feel defensive? Scared? Shameful? Overwhelmed?).
3. Does the situation bring up any memories for you of past relationships such as past romantic partners or family interactions?
4. How might the ways you are reacting to the situation be impacted by past relationships?
5. What do you think you need in this situation?

Breath. Notice how you feel.

Part 2:

Switch to your partner's perspective:

1. Describe the situation briefly from what you imagine to be your partner's perspective.
2. What reactions do you think they are having in the situation? (do they feel defensive, scared, shameful, overwhelmed).
3. From what you know of their past experiences with romantic/family relationships, how might those experiences be impacting their reactions?
4. What do you think they need in this situation?

Breath. Notice how you feel.

Part 3:

Imagine a person with great wisdom (real or imagined) and feel their support, compassion, and consider their guidance.

1. Write down the thoughts and feelings you think the wise person may have about the situation from their perspective for a few minutes. What advice or insight might they offer?

Breath. Notice how you feel.

The ability to shift perspective is always available to you and can offer valuable input into the feelings you have been unable to resolve.



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EXAMPLE

EXERCISE: ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

Part 1:

1. We agreed that we would spend quality time together after work and I was looking forward to it. I picked out snacks and a show the day before. I was thinking of reuniting all day while at work to get me through the day. I texted things like “I’m excited to see you! ☺” a couple of times throughout the day and received “me too.” and then no response the second time. I got home first. When she came in the door, she seemed irritated and dropped her stuff by the door and went straight to the bathroom without looking at me. I got upset and when she exited the bathroom I said something like “well hi to you too” and we got into a fight and ended up spending the night in separate rooms.
2. I felt disappointed, angry, and stupid for being excited. It seemed like she didn’t even care or think about me all day. I go to a place of feeling like I shouldn’t have cared so much and I wouldn’t be feeling like this right now.
3. This does bring up memories of when I was a kid of constantly being disappointed by my dad. Especially the times he would tell me we would spend a weekend together, but then, usually on Friday or even Saturday morning, would say that he can’t anymore. I would cry and feel bad all weekend. Eventually, I just numbed to it.
4. Maybe some of those old feelings are coming up here. Like, here we go again, I’m always going to be disappointed by other people. I’m not important enough to them.
5. I think I need reassurance that I am important and understood from them about why I felt upset.





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EXAMPLE

EXERCISE: ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

Part 2:

- (I don't know what happened for them before they got home, but when they got home). I saw my partner as I came in the door very eager to see me. I had something to do in the bathroom that had to be done really fast. When I came out of the bathroom my partner seemed irritated and said a passive aggressive remark to me. We then had a fight.
- I think they felt defensive, confused, and exhausted (I am now recalling they have been very overwhelmed at work and mad at their boss).
- I know they always had to take care of their younger siblings because their parents were always gone and they never got time to themselves. They share with me how frustrated they are when they don't have downtime. Maybe it felt like I was demanding something from them at that moment.
- I think they need my curiosity and support.

Part 3:

- A wise person might say that there was a miscommunication in this situation and we need to hear each other out without getting defensive. We both lost this night because we fought and didn't get any time to connect. We should share each other's experiences of the day and really listen and comfort each other's hurt and overwhelm without the narrative that we are bad or wrong.





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EXERCISE: INITIATOR/INQUIRER

This exercise is designed to improve communication and understanding between partners. Developed by Ellyn Bader, this practice aims to create a safe space for open dialogue, empathy, and the exploration of each partner's feelings and needs.

THIS IS A GREAT OPPORTUNITY TO REVIEW SKILLS ALREADY COVERED:

- Make sure you are regulated and use box breathing (pg. 4-5)
- Play catch, not ping pong (pg. 21)
- Remember the difference between needs versus criticism (pg. 19-20)
- Use active listening skills (pg 22-23)





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EXERCISE: INITIATOR/INQUIRER

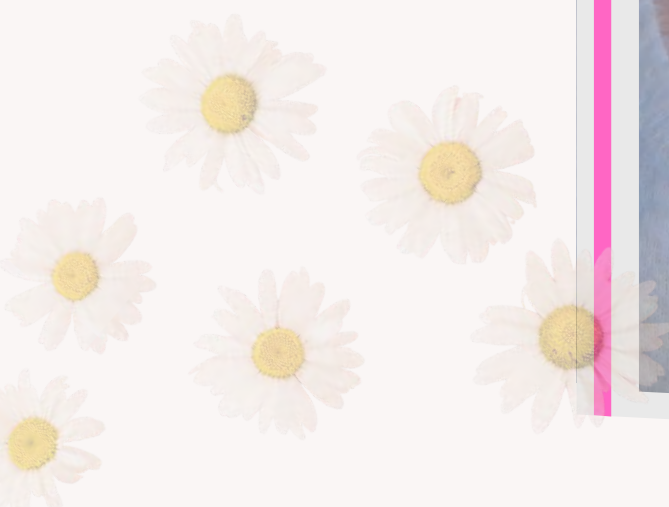
The Initiator/Inquirer exercise involves two roles: the Initiator and the Inquirer. Here's how the exercise typically unfolds:

- **Setting the Stage:** The couple sits facing each other in a quiet and comfortable space, free from distractions. They agree to take turns in the roles of Initiator and Inquirer.
- **The Initiator's Role:** The initiator takes the first turn and shares a personal issue, concern, or experience with their partner. They express their thoughts, feelings, and needs related to the chosen topic. The initiator's goal is to share their experience honestly and vulnerably.
- **The Inquirer's Role:** The inquirer listens attentively to the initiator's sharing without interrupting or offering any judgments. Once the initiator has finished speaking, the inquirer takes on the role of a curious observer. The inquirer asks open-ended questions to gather more information, gain deeper understanding, and explore the initiator's experience further.
- **Active Listening and Exploration:** The inquirer focuses on asking questions that help the initiator clarify their feelings, beliefs, or desires. The questions should be non-judgmental, curious, and aimed at uncovering the underlying emotions and needs behind the initiator's words. The inquirer should strive to understand their partner's perspective fully.

Stephanie Bain



Hi, I'm
Stephanie, a
couples and
relationship
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Oakland, CA.



***Resources are not a substitute for therapy and are not intended for making diagnoses or providing treatment. Not all practices and tools are suitable for every person. Please discuss exercises, practices, and tools with your individual therapist or healthcare provider.

