

Beyond Fairy Tales

A Couple's Guide to Finding Clarity, Doing the Work,
and Building a Lasting Relationship

HANDOUTS AND WORKSHEETS



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ATTACHMENT QUIZ:

DISCOVER YOUR PRIMARY RELATIONSHIP TENDENCY

Let's take a simple quiz designed to help you uncover your relationship tendencies. When you're going through this quiz, remember that it's not about getting an A+ or finding the right answer. There actually are no wrong answers. It's simply a means of illuminating your behavioral and emotional tendencies in relationships. Just pick the answer that feels accurate; there's no need to overthink it. The results will give you a general idea of your dominant tendency. Then, as we discuss these tendencies in more detail, you can keep your primary relationship tendency in mind.

Additionally, you can retake the quiz while considering your partner's tendencies. Remember, this is merely a well-informed guess. It's crucial for your partner to identify which tendency best represents them. If you're comfortable doing so, you might ask your partner if they would be willing to take the quiz; who knows, maybe this would spur them to want to read more. At the very least, it would give both of you valuable insight.



LET'S BEGIN THE QUIZ

How comfortable are you opening up emotionally to someone in a close relationship?

- ☐ A I find it easy to share my feelings and be vulnerable.
- ☐ B I worry about rejection if I open up too much.
- ☐ C I prefer to keep my emotions private.
- ☐ D I struggle to understand my own emotions, making it hard to share them.

When there's a disagreement with your partner, do you express your concerns directly or avoid conflict altogether?

- ☐ A I believe in open communication and work toward a solution together.
- ☐ B I worry about upsetting my partner, so I might hold back my feelings.
- ☐ C I tend to withdraw and avoid confrontation.
- ☐ D Disagreements confuse me, and I might react unpredictably.

How would you describe your comfort level when asking for help from your partner?

- ☐ A I feel comfortable asking for help when I need it.
- ☐ B I worry they'll judge me or think I'm weak if I ask for help.
- ☐ C I prefer to handle things myself and rarely ask for help.
- ☐ D My comfort level with asking for help varies depending on the situation.

ATTACHMENT QUIZ

Do you enjoy spending time alone, or do you crave constant companionship?

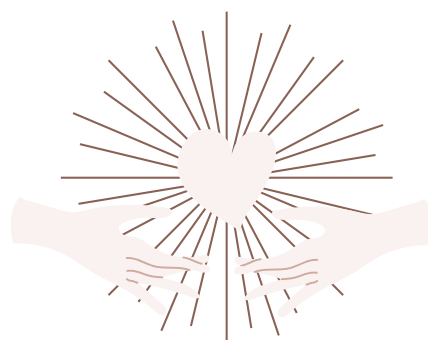
- A** ☐ I enjoy my own company but also value spending time with loved ones.
- B** ☐ The thought of being alone makes me anxious.
- C** ☐ I generally prefer solitude and feel more at ease when alone.
- D** ☐ I have mixed feelings about being alone; sometimes I crave it, other times I don't.

Imagine your partner wants to spend more quality time with you. How do you feel?

- A** ☐ I'd be happy to spend more time together.
- B** ☐ I might worry that they're clingy or insecure.
- C** ☐ I might feel a need for some personal space.
- D** ☐ My feelings would be mixed, depending on my mood.

How important is physical and emotional intimacy to you in a relationship?

- A** ☐ Intimacy is a vital part of a healthy relationship for me.
- B** ☐ I crave intimacy but might be afraid of rejection.
- C** ☐ I don't see intimacy as a necessity and might avoid it.
- D** ☐ My views on intimacy are inconsistent and confusing.



ATTACHMENT QUIZ

Do you generally feel secure and worthy of love in your relationships?

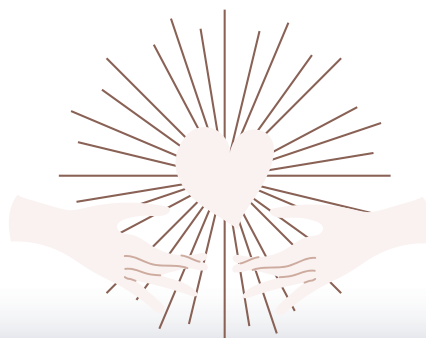
- ☐ **A** Yes, I have a positive self-image within relationships.
- ☐ **B** I often question my value as a partner.
- ☐ **C** My sense of worth doesn't depend heavily on relationships.
- ☐ **D** My feelings of self-worth fluctuate greatly in relationships.

How easily do you trust your partner?

- ☐ **A** I trust easily and openly in my relationships.
- ☐ **B** I find it challenging to trust fully and fear betrayal.
- ☐ **C** Trusting someone deeply takes a long time for me.
- ☐ **D** Trust is a complex issue for me, and my feelings can change quickly.

Imagine your partner expresses a desire for more independence in the relationship. How would you react?

- ☐ **A** I'd be supportive, understanding the need for space.
- ☐ **B** I might feel insecure and worried about losing them.
- ☐ **C** I'd feel relieved and happy they value their independence.
- ☐ **D** I'd have mixed emotions, unsure how to respond.



ATTACHMENT QUIZ

When your partner is upset, what's your natural instinct?

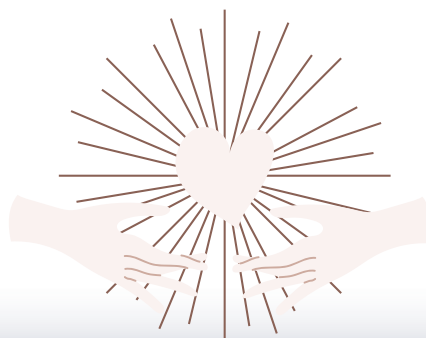
- A** ☐ I want to offer comfort and understanding.
- B** ☐ I might feel overwhelmed by their emotions and become anxious.
- C** ☐ I might withdraw or feel uncomfortable with their distress.
- D** ☐ I'm unsure how to react and might feel confused by their emotions.

How would you describe your ideal communication style in a relationship?

- A** ☐ I am open, honest, and comfortable discussing anything.
- B** ☐ Frequent reassurance and check-ins are important to me.
- C** ☐ I prefer clear communication but avoid overly emotional conversations.
- D** ☐ Communication can be confusing; sometimes I crave it, sometimes I withdraw.

Imagine seeing your partner talking to someone attractive. What's your first thought?

- A** ☐ I trust my partner and wouldn't be worried.
- B** ☐ I might feel insecure and wonder if they're attracted to someone else.
- C** ☐ It wouldn't bother me; I trust my partner to maintain boundaries.
- D** ☐ I might experience a mix of jealousy and confusion.



ATTACHMENT QUIZ

In your opinion, the most important qualities in a relationship are:

- ☐ A Mutual respect, trust, and open communication.
- ☐ B Constant reassurance, affection, and emotional security.
- ☐ C Independence, personal space, and clear boundaries.
- ☐ D A balance of closeness and independence, but it can vary over time.

How do you handle disagreements with friends?

- ☐ A I can express my perspective calmly and work toward a resolution.
- ☐ B I might worry about damaging the friendship and avoid conflict.
- ☐ C I tend to dismiss disagreements or withdraw from the situation.
- ☐ D Disagreements with friends can be emotionally unpredictable for me.

Do you find it easy to forgive your partner after a fight?

- ☐ A Yes, I believe in forgiveness and moving forward.
- ☐ B I might struggle to forgive if I feel hurt or insecure.
- ☐ C Forgiveness comes easily; I don't hold onto grudges.
- ☐ D My ability to forgive depends on the situation and my mood.

How comfortable are you introducing your partner to your close friends and family?

- ☐ A I'd be happy to introduce them and share them with loved ones.
- ☐ B I might feel anxious about how they'll be perceived.
- ☐ C I might prefer to keep my personal life separate for a while.
- ☐ D My comfort level with introductions would depend on the circumstances.

ATTACHMENT QUIZ

Imagine your partner cancels plans last minute. How do you react?

- ☐ A I can understand and would try to reschedule.
- ☐ B I might feel hurt or rejected and wonder if they don't care about my feelings.
- ☐ C It wouldn't bother me much; I'm flexible with plans.
- ☐ D My reaction would depend on the reason and my mood at the time.

Ending a relationship is difficult for you because:

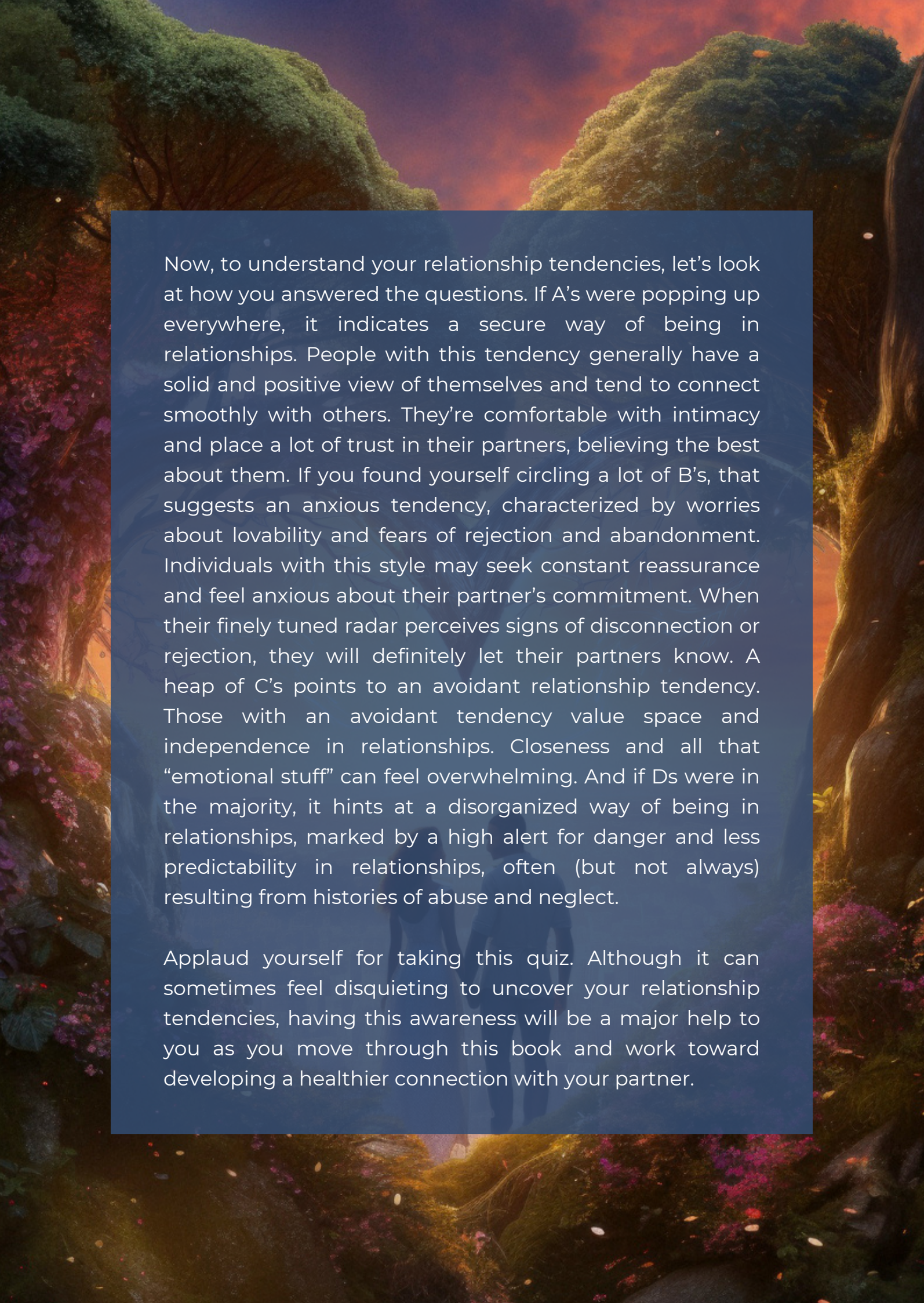
- ☐ A I value commitment, and I invested time in the relationship.
- ☐ B I fear being alone and worry about finding someone else.
- ☐ C I prefer to avoid messy situations and prolonged goodbyes.
- ☐ D My emotions are conflicted, and I might feel a mix of relief and sadness.

How would you describe your past romantic relationships overall?

- ☐ A Generally positive with healthy communication and trust.
- ☐ B Often characterized by insecurity and a fear of abandonment.
- ☐ C Mostly independent with limited emotional intimacy.
- ☐ D Inconsistent and confusing with mixed experiences.

Imagine your partner is going on a work trip for a week. How do you feel?

- ☐ A Supportive and understanding; I enjoy some alone time too.
- ☐ B I might feel anxious about missing them and worry about the distance.
- ☐ C I wouldn't mind; I value my own space and independence.
- ☐ D My feelings would be mixed; I might crave their presence but also enjoy the time alone.

The background of the page is a romantic forest scene at sunset. The sky is a mix of deep purple, magenta, and orange. Lush green trees frame the top and sides of the image. In the foreground, there are vibrant purple and pink flowers. A couple is walking away from the viewer down a path in the center, their figures silhouetted against the bright light of the setting sun. The overall mood is peaceful and intimate.

Now, to understand your relationship tendencies, let's look at how you answered the questions. If A's were popping up everywhere, it indicates a secure way of being in relationships. People with this tendency generally have a solid and positive view of themselves and tend to connect smoothly with others. They're comfortable with intimacy and place a lot of trust in their partners, believing the best about them. If you found yourself circling a lot of B's, that suggests an anxious tendency, characterized by worries about lovability and fears of rejection and abandonment. Individuals with this style may seek constant reassurance and feel anxious about their partner's commitment. When their finely tuned radar perceives signs of disconnection or rejection, they will definitely let their partners know. A heap of C's points to an avoidant relationship tendency. Those with an avoidant tendency value space and independence in relationships. Closeness and all that "emotional stuff" can feel overwhelming. And if Ds were in the majority, it hints at a disorganized way of being in relationships, marked by a high alert for danger and less predictability in relationships, often (but not always) resulting from histories of abuse and neglect.

Applaud yourself for taking this quiz. Although it can sometimes feel disquieting to uncover your relationship tendencies, having this awareness will be a major help to you as you move through this book and work toward developing a healthier connection with your partner.

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SCHEDULE A SCUBA DIVING ENCOUNTER

Here's a practice that might just change the way you and your partner connect: embark on a weekly scuba diving expedition into the depths of each other's emotional, physical, and mental landscapes. Picture it as setting aside sacred time each week (or more frequently, if you can) to put on your metaphorical diving gear and explore the undercurrents of your partner's experiences with three golden connective questions:

"What is happening in your world?"

"How are you feeling?"

"What do you need from me?"

This isn't a time for arguments or battles of ego. It's not about going tit for tat or trying to outdo each other with past grievances. Instead, it's about navigating the deeper waters of each other's lives. It's about intimacy—*"into-me-see."*

As you connect, take turns. Reflect back what you hear the other person saying. Remember, *"ear"* is nestled within *"heart,"* as a gentle reminder that empathic listening is a direct path to reaching someone's oceanic heart.

For a deeper way to communicate and connect, we can shake things up a bit. Instead of asking *"How are you feeling?"* try this: "What are you experiencing?" It's a subtle shift but it opens the door to richer, more meaningful conversations.

We often prioritize sharing certain parts of our experience and neglect others. Some of us are more comfortable talking about our feelings, while others lean toward discussing thoughts. But intimacy is enriched by exploring each other's different channels of experience. These channels offer a comprehensive understanding of the myriad ways we experience and express our inner worlds, creating a deeper and more nuanced connection.

Consider the seven channels of experiencing as developed by David Mars, the founder of Transformative Couples Therapy®. Sharing your experiences along these channels to your partner, and listening empathically as your partner shares theirs, provides a holistic approach to understanding and connecting with your partner on a profound level:

SEVEN CHANNELS OF EXPERIENCE

Sensation: Tune into physical sensations in the body. Notice tension, relaxation, warmth, coolness, and other bodily experiences. Bridging the mind-body divide can bring awareness to how physical states influence emotions and thoughts. Recognizing muscle tension can sometimes speak louder than words.

Example: *"I notice that my shoulders tense up whenever I think about work. Just talking about it makes my neck feel tight. It's like my body is carrying the weight of my stress."*

Emotion: Recognize core emotions such as anger, sadness, joy, fear, and disgust. Pay attention to how these feelings manifest physically. Allowing tears to flow when feeling sadness can create a moment of shared vulnerability.

Example: *"I feel really sad when I think about how little time we've had together lately. It's like a heavy feeling in my chest, and sometimes I just need to cry about it."*

Energetic: Observe the subtle energies in the body, like feelings of lightness or heaviness, and the overall energetic charge. Feeling into what you love about your partner and noticing how it touches you can enhance your emotional bond.

Example: *"When I think about our last vacation, I feel this warm, light sensation in my chest. It's like my whole body relaxes and fills with happiness."*

Movement: Pay attention to body movements, postural shifts, and nonverbal expressions. A shift in posture during a conversation can indicate deeper, perhaps unspoken, feelings.

Example: *"I noticed I crossed my arms when we started talking about finances. I guess it's a sign that I'm feeling defensive or worried about it."*

SEVEN CHANNELS OF EXPERIENCE

Auditory: Listen to the tone, pitch, and rhythm of speech. The sweetness of your partner's voice, for instance, can touch you deeply and communicate their affection.

Example: *"When you told me about your day, I could hear the stress in your voice. It sounded strained, and I could tell you were overwhelmed."*

Visual: Observe facial expressions, eye movements, and overall visual cues. Seeing your partner's bright eyes and soft smile can communicate warmth and love nonverbally.

Example: *"I saw your eyes light up when you talked about your new project. Your whole face seemed to brighten, and it made me feel so proud of you."*

Imaginal: Engage with spontaneous or intentionally invited internal images, whether literal or symbolic. Imagining holding your younger self in your mind's eye can bring past experiences into the present for healing and understanding.

Example: *"When I think about that argument we had, I picture myself as a kid, feeling scared and small. It helps me understand why I reacted so strongly."*



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You might be thinking, “*Who talks like that?*” I get it. It’s not your everyday conversation style. We usually just share our thoughts, and when we do talk about emotions, it’s often about our feelings rather than from our feelings—unless we’re angry, of course. But just because it’s uncommon doesn’t mean we should shy away from these deeper ways of being known. By bringing these channels into your regular check-ins, you and your partner can cultivate a richer, more empathetic connection. This approach helps both partners feel truly seen, heard, and understood on multiple levels, strengthening your bond.

Diving into these questions about each other’s world and exploring what you both notice through the different channels will likely open you up to offering empathy and compassion whenever the opportunity arises. Once we attune to each other’s experiences and allow the seeds of our needs to be planted in our tilled hearts, we can seek to love one another in ways that truly help us feel loved and cared for.

If turbulent currents or a whirlpool of negativity pull you off course, take a break. Come up for air on your respective sides of the boat and plan to dive back in when the waters are calm.



CRAFT SOME ART

If your schedule is tight or the idea of sitting face-to-face, locking eyes, and delving into deep, heartfelt conversations causes palpitations and feels about as unpleasant as biting into a sour lemon—then maybe you can try crafting some ART. ART stands for **Attachment-Related Texts**.

Never overlook the power of a text message to show your partner that you're tuned into their life and empathically understand their thoughts and emotions. Using attachment-based language aims to speak to the core of our partner's being, making them feel seen, appreciated, respected, valued, and loved.

Here are some examples of ART:

1. EXPRESSIONS OF LOVE AND AFFECTION

- *"I love you."*
- *"I miss you."*
- *"Hey, sexy! Thinking about you!"*
- *"I feel so connected to you, even when we're apart."*
- *"Just thinking about our last conversation brings a smile to my face."*
- *"I love how we can talk about anything and everything."*
- *"I miss your smile. Can't wait to see you again."*

2. APPRECIATION AND GRATITUDE

- *"You are so important to me."*
- *"Thank you for being such a wonderful dad."*
- *"Just wanted to remind you how much I appreciate you."*
- *"Thank you for apologizing this morning. It meant a lot."*
- *"Thank you for being my rock. I appreciate you more than words can say."*
- *"I'm so grateful to have you in my life. You make everything better."*
- *"Your kindness and love mean everything to me."*

CRAFT SOME ART

ATTACHMENT-RELATED TEXTS

3. SUPPORT AND REASSURANCE

- *"I'm here for you, no matter what."*
- *"No matter what happens, I'm here with you."*
- *"You never have to face anything alone—I'm always by your side."*
- *"We're a team, and we can get through anything together."*
- *"Sorry you are feeling sad. I have a hug waiting for you when you come home."*
- *"I believe in you. You've got this!"*
- *"I'm so proud of everything you're doing. You inspire me."*
- *"I'm always cheering you on, even from afar."*

4. CHECK-INS AND THOUGHTFULNESS

- *"Can't wait to hear about your day."*
- *"Just checking in—how are you doing today?"*
- *"Thinking of you and hoping your day is going well."*

5. EMPATHIC APOLOGIES

- *"Thank you for apologizing this morning. It meant a lot."*
- *"I'm sorry for how I handled things earlier. I realize now how it affected you."*
- *"I regret that my words hurt you, and I want to make things right."*
- *"I can see now that I wasn't fully listening to you, and I'm sorry for that."*
- *"I'm sorry for my part in our argument—I value our relationship too much to let this linger."*
- *"I understand now why you felt hurt, and I'm truly sorry."*

CRAFT SOME ART

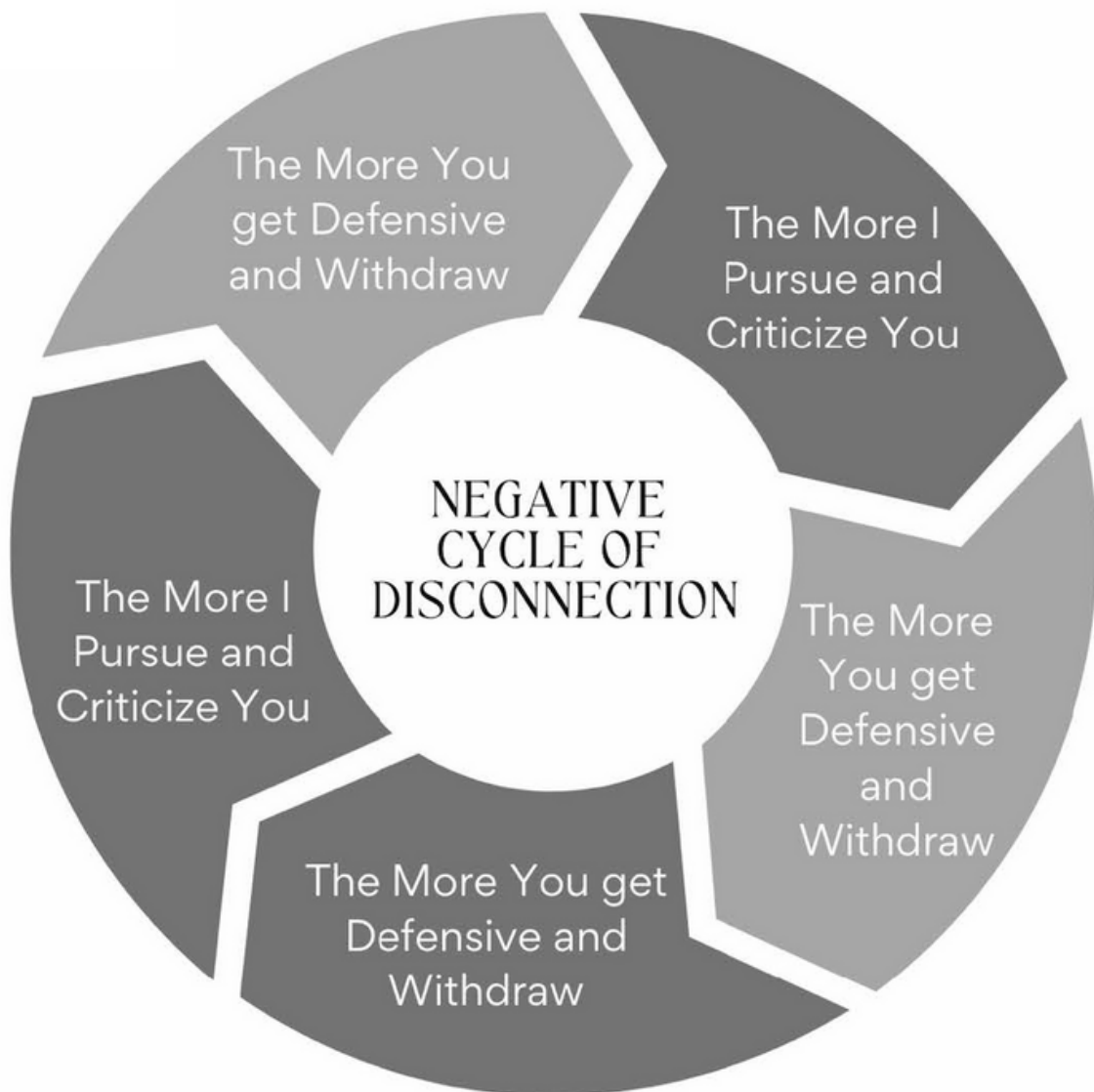
ATTACHMENT-RELATED TEXTS

6. ACKNOWLEDGING OUR NEGATIVE CYCLE

- *"I see now how we both get stuck in this cycle, and I want to work on breaking it together."*
- *"I recognize my role in our negative pattern, and I'm committed to changing it."*
- *"I realize that when I withdraw, it hurts you, and I want to do better."*
- *"I notice that when we argue, I tend to get defensive, and I'm working on being more open."*
- *"I'm sorry for how I've contributed to our cycle, and I'm ready to work on it with you."*
- *"Let's talk about how we can both step out of this negative cycle and find a healthier way to connect."*



MAPPING THE BASIC MOVES OF YOUR NEGATIVE CYCLE



MAPPING THE BASIC MOVES OF YOUR NEGATIVE CYCLE

Have you ever noticed that even though the day and the topics change, when disagreements or arguments arise, you and your partner seem caught in the same predictable pattern of disconnection? Couple therapists refer to this pattern as the “negative cycle.” Negative cycles are entrenched patterns that result from wired-in relational tendencies interacting with each other, along with the cumulative effects of unmet relational longings, unclear signals, reactive emotions, and often unprocessed pain. After manifesting numerous times, these patterns become like a powerful snowball rolling down a hill, gaining a life of their own and harming the relationship.

Based on Chapter 4, what negative cycles, most closely resembles your relationship?

- **Blame and Bash**
- **Fracture and Fortify**
- **Wend, Whirl, and Withdraw**
- **Pull Back and Protest**

Let's take a look at an example of the basic moves with a couple caught in the Pull Back and Protest cycle:



MAPPING THE BASIC MOVES OF YOUR NEGATIVE CYCLE

BASIC MOVES

The more I pursue and protest, the more my partner pulls back and withdraws, and then the more I pursue and protest, and around we go in circles.

REVERSING THE ORDER

The more my partner pulls back and withdraws, the more I pursue and protest, and then the more they pull back and withdraw, and around we go in circles.

Fill in the blanks below to better understand your and your partner's predominant communication pattern and recognize its cyclical elements.

BASIC MOVES

The more I _____ [describe your action], the more my partner _____ [describe their action], and then the more I _____ [describe your action], and around we go in circles.

Now, reverse the pattern. Start with your partner's typical action, followed by your response. This helps illustrate that the cycle can begin with either person, underscoring the shared dynamics in the relationship.

REVERSING THE ORDER

The more my partner _____ [describe their action], the more I _____ [describe your reaction], and then the more they _____ [describe their action], and around we go in circles.

Now, reverse the pattern. Start with your partner's typical action, followed by your response. This helps illustrate that the cycle can begin with either person, underscoring the shared dynamics in the relationship.

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MAPPING THE ANATOMY OF THE YOUR NEGATIVE CYCLE

The anatomy of the negative cycle, includes the threat system, triggers, primary and secondary emotions, behaviors, relationship-based negative narratives, and contextual dynamics.

Contextual dynamics refer to the broader circumstances surrounding the relationship, such as work stress, health issues, or parenting challenges, that create a fertile ground for conflict. **Triggers** are specific events or actions that ignite the cycle, often touching on sensitive areas. These triggers elicit **primary emotions**, such as fear, sadness, or hurt, which are the vulnerable feelings beneath the surface. However, these primary emotions are often masked by **secondary emotions** like anger, frustration, or defensiveness, which are more readily expressed. These emotions drive **behaviors** that are typically protective, defensive, or aggressive, escalating the conflict. Over time, these interactions reinforce **relationship-based negative narratives**, the stories partners tell themselves about each other and the relationship, such as feeling unloved or unappreciated. All of these elements activate the **threat system**, the body's instinctual response to perceived danger, which makes it difficult for partners to connect and instead leads them to react from a place of self-protection.

Detail your own experiences within the negative communication cycle you and your partner encounter. If you need help completing the exercise, refer back to the charts in Chapter Five.

First, let's explore an example looking at the unique anatomy of Nora and James' negative communication cycle.

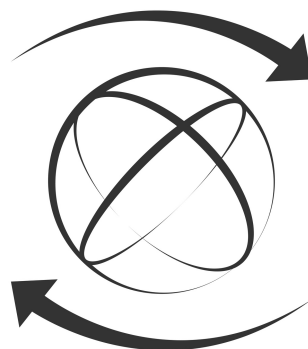
NORA'S ANATOMY OF THE NEGATIVE CYCLE

RELATIONSHIP TENDENCY: ANXIOUS

TYPE OF CYCLE: PULL BACK AND PROTEST

The contextual issues we are dealing with are parenting, existential, roles and responsibilities, and effects of cultural expectations and patriarchy concerns. When I encounter certain triggers, whether internally or from my partner, such as minimizing and invalidating my feelings, my partner often experiences my secondary emotions, such as frustration and anger. Then, they see me engage in certain behaviors, such as blaming, attacking, and demeaning. Often, during these moments, I can feel physiological reactions within my body, such as a racing heart, tightening in my jaw, and flushed cheeks. When we are in conflicts, I often have negative thoughts about myself, my partner, or our futures, such as "You don't care about me," "You don't do anything around here," and "It is not fair you get to spend more time with the kids." As my partner persists in their reactive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, this further triggers me, and around and around we go. What my partner doesn't hear about is that deep down, I'm really feeling primary emotions/core emotional experiences, such as sadness, guilt, and shame. Behind my big feelings and reactive behaviors, there are more vulnerable needs and longings, such as "I need you to hold me, tell me you love me, and reassure me I am not a bad mom."

Now it's your turn...

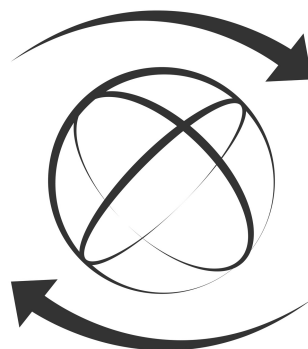


WHAT IS THE ANATOMY OF YOUR NEGATIVE CYCLE?

RELATIONSHIP TENDENCY:

TYPE OF CYCLE: _____

The contextual issues we are dealing with are _____. When I encounter certain triggers, whether internally or from my partner, such as _____, my partner often experiences my secondary emotions, such as _____. Then, they see me engage in certain behaviors, such as _____. Often, during these moments, I can feel physiological reactions within my body, such as _____. When we are in conflicts, I often have negative thoughts about myself, my partner, or our futures, such as _____. As my partner persists in their reactive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, this further triggers me, and around and around we go. What my partner doesn't hear about is that deep down, I'm really feeling primary emotions/core emotional experiences, such as _____. Behind my big feelings and reactive behaviors, there are more vulnerable needs and longings, such as _____.



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HOW I FEEL LOVED?

This worksheet, inspired by Gary Chapman's *The Five Love Languages*, is designed to help you and your partner discover how you each feel most loved—because let's be honest, love can be complex, and a little guidance goes a long way. By understanding what truly resonates with one another, you can strengthen your connection and better fill each other's emotional tanks. Sharing what makes you feel seen and appreciated equips you both to create a more fulfilling and supportive partnership. So, dive in with honesty, and explore the small, meaningful ways you can intentionally show up for each other in this beautiful, messy journey called love.

Words of Affirmation	Acts of Service
I feel loved when you:	I feel loved when you:
☐ Say "I love you"	☐ Cook my favorite meal
☐ Praise my achievements	☐ Do household chores
☐ Compliment my appearance	☐ Run errands for me
☐ Express gratitude	☐ Fix something that's broken
☐ Send me a loving text message	☐ Help with a project
☐ Write me a heartfelt letter	☐ Take care of the kids
☐ Publicly acknowledge my efforts	☐ Fill up my car with gas
☐ Offer verbal encouragement	☐ Prepare my lunch
☐ Thank me for my support	☐ Clean up after me
☐ _____	☐ _____
☐ _____	☐ _____

HOW I FEEL LOVED?

Receiving Gifts	Quality Time
I feel loved when you:	I feel loved when you:
☐ Buy my favorite snack	☐ Plan a date night
☐ Give me a personalized gift	☐ Go for a walk with me
☐ Surprise me with flowers	☐ Have a deep conversation with me
☐ Gift me a book I've been wanting	☐ Watch a movie together
☐ Buy me a meaningful piece of jewelry	☐ Go on a weekend getaway
☐ Give me a handmade gift	☐ Play a game with me
☐ Surprise me with tickets to an event	☐ Cook a meal together
☐ Buy me a small gift just because	☐ Take a class or workshop with me
☐ _____	☐ Visit a new place together
☐ _____	☐ _____
	☐ _____

Physical Touch	Other
I feel loved when you:	I feel loved when you:
☐ Hug me	☐ Respect my need for space
☐ Hold my hand	☐ Support my relationship with my child
☐ Kiss me	☐ Work on shared goals with me
☐ Cuddle with me on the couch	☐ Encourage my personal growth
☐ Give me a back rub	☐ Offer understanding during stressful times
☐ Play with my hair	☐ Are patient with my emotions
☐ Rest your hand on my arm	☐ Give me time to pursue my hobbies
☐ Give me a foot massage	☐ Help me with my personal projects
☐ Touch my shoulder as you walk by	☐ Understand my unique needs
☐ _____	☐ _____
☐ _____	☐ _____

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INCORPORATING MORE PLAY AND NOVELTY IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP

Research shows that couples who regularly engage in playful activities and seek new experiences together report higher levels of relationship satisfaction and emotional bonding.⁷ Playfulness fosters intimacy, reduces stress, and enhances communication, making it a vital ingredient for a thriving relationship. Playfulness also has a physiological component; it increases neurochemicals that enhance our emotional connection. Dopamine, associated with pleasure and reward, enhances feelings of excitement and novelty, while oxytocin, known as the “love hormone,” promotes bonding and trust.

Incorporating play and novelty into your relationship can rejuvenate your bond and keep your connection vibrant. Here are some ideas to help you and your partner add a sense of fun and adventure to your relationship:

- o **Explore New Hobbies Together:** Take up new activities like dancing, painting, or cooking classes. Learning something new together can create a shared sense of achievement and discovery.
- o **Engage in Physical Activities:** Try hiking, cycling, or even a new sport. Physical activities not only promote health but also foster teamwork and create memorable experiences.
- o **Plan Spontaneous Getaways:** Surprise each other with weekend trips or day-long road trips to unexplored places. These adventures can break the monotony of daily routines and provide fresh environments in which to connect.
- o **Attend Local Events:** Check out local festivals, concerts, or community events. These outings can be a great way to experience new things together and feel part of a larger community.
- o **Game Nights and Competitions:** Host game nights or engage in friendly competitions. Whether it's board games, video games, or sports, playful competition can strengthen your bond and add laughter to your relationship.

INCORPORATING MORE PLAY AND NOVELTY IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP

- **Try New Restaurants:** Make a list of restaurants you've never been to and visit one each week. This not only satisfies culinary curiosity but also gives you both something to look forward to regularly.
- **Engage in Playful Banter:** Don't underestimate the power of humor and playful teasing. Lighthearted interactions can keep the atmosphere in your relationship fun and relaxed.
- **Participate in Novelty Activities:** Activities like escape rooms, amusement parks, or even trying out a new form of exercise like rock climbing or yoga can be exciting and bond-strengthening.
- **Creative Projects:** Work on creative projects together, such as building something, gardening, or writing a story. These activities can be deeply satisfying and give you both a sense of shared accomplishment.
- **Revisit Favorite Childhood Activities:** Whether flying kites, playing catch, or visiting a zoo, engaging in activities you loved as children can bring a sense of nostalgia and joy to your relationship.
- **Celebrate Random Occasions:** Invent your own holidays and traditions. Celebrate half-birthdays, the anniversary of your first date, or even "just because" days. These little celebrations can add fun and excitement to your relationship.
- **Travel and Explore:** Whether exploring a distant destination or your own city, travel can bring a sense of adventure and discovery into your relationship. Try visiting new places and experiencing different cultures together.
- **Educational Adventures:** Attend workshops or classes on topics that interest you both. This could be anything from photography to astronomy, fostering mutual growth and learning.

INCORPORATING MORE PLAY AND NOVELTY IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP

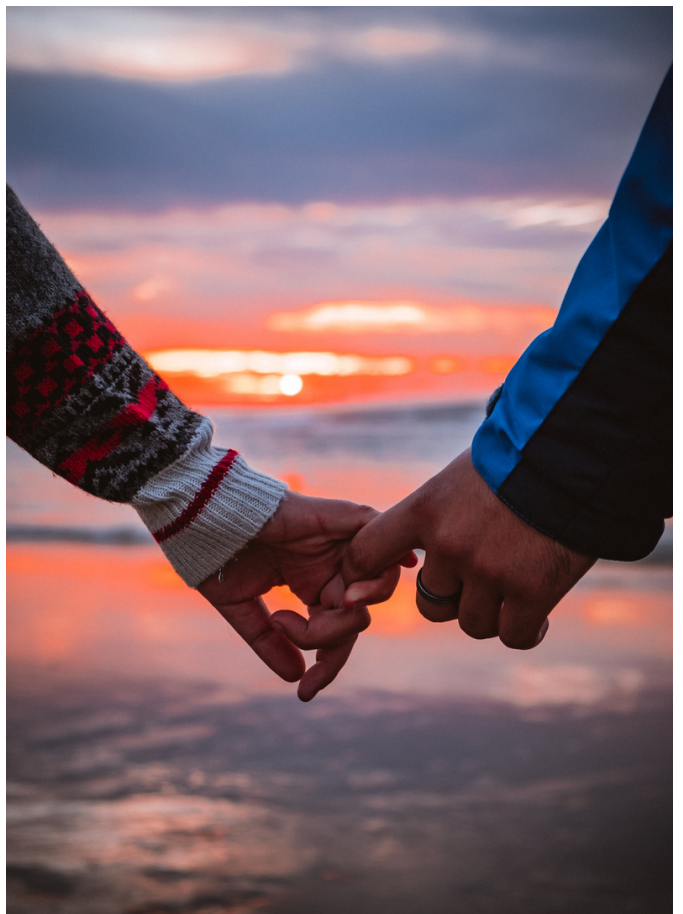
- o **Outdoor Activities:** Spend time in nature together. Activities like camping, fishing, or simply picnicking in the park can provide a refreshing change from your daily routine.
- o **DIY Projects:** Take on do-it-yourself projects around the house. Whether redecorating a room, building furniture, or crafting, working together on a project can be a fun and rewarding experience.
- o **Spiritual and Mindfulness Practices:** Explore mindfulness, meditation, or yoga together. These practices can deepen your emotional connection and provide a sense of peace and balance.
- o **Surprise Date Nights:** Take turns planning surprise date nights for each other. The anticipation and mystery can bring a new level of excitement to your routine.
- o **Volunteer Together:** Spend time giving back to the community. Volunteering for a cause you both care about can be fulfilling and strengthen your bond through shared values and efforts.
- o **Seasonal Activities:** Embrace seasonal activities like apple picking in the fall, ice skating in the winter, or beach outings in the summer. These activities can create lasting memories and add variety to your time together.
- o **Learning Each Other's Interests:** Take time to learn more about each other's hobbies and interests. Whether watching a favorite movie series, reading a book one loves, or participating in a beloved hobby, showing interest in each other's passions can deepen your connection.

*Beyond
Fairy Tales*

KEEPING SANE: STOPPING THE CYCLE BEFORE IT GETS BIGGER

Naming your cycle externalizes it, transforming it into a separate entity you and your partner can team up against and conquer. After you've understood and named this pesky intruder and fully accepted that it's the real enemy of your relationship, you'll be better equipped to stop it in its tracks by launching the SANE approach:

- o **See what is happening:** Be mindful that you are caught in the negative cycle.
- o **Accept your part in the cycle:** Pause and acknowledge your role in the situation.
- o **Name the cycle:** Identify and call out the negative pattern by name.
- o **Engage toward healthy relating:** Take steps to engage in healthier, loving behaviors.



This approach helps us to notice the behaviors and recognize that the negative cycle is starting, accept our part in the cycle, call out the negative cycle with our partner, and make an effort to engage in healthier ways of relating. Let's look at an example.

Josh and Priscilla sat at their cozy dinner table, the aroma of a homemade meal filling the room. Despite the warm atmosphere, an underlying tension lingered, waiting to surface. Having anxious tendencies, Josh found it difficult to relax because he and Priscilla had to discuss their finances. These types of conversations triggered Priscilla's avoidant tendencies, which often overwhelmed her. So, she preferred to steer clear of conflict but left those conversations with a lot of shame.

As they started eating, Josh hesitated but then brought up the topic weighing on his mind. "Priscilla, I've been thinking about our finances," he began, trying to keep an even tone. "I feel like we need to figure out a way for you to contribute more."

Priscilla's shoulders tensed. She put down her fork and sighed. "Josh, you know I'm doing the best I can. I don't make as much as you. I don't have answers for you. What do you want from me?"

Josh's rising anxiety and racing thoughts produced a harsh tone as he said, "But it's not just about how much you make. It's about finding ways to balance things better. I feel like I'm carrying most of the burden."

Priscilla's instinct was to retreat and avoid the confrontation. "I don't know what more I can do," she replied, her voice edging toward defensiveness. "I'm already stretched thin by paying off student loans, leaving me barely able to contribute what I do. Why do you always have to ruin a perfectly good meal?"

Now angered, Josh said, "Why do you always want to avoid real conversations? You never want to talk about budgeting or maybe getting another job. We need to figure it out ... now!"

They were slipping into their familiar negative cycle. Josh's anxiety and frustration led him to push harder, while Priscilla's avoidant tendencies and feelings of being overwhelmed made her want to withdraw. But as they were getting sucked into the negative cycle, Josh remembered the SANE approach from their therapy sessions.

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- o **See what is happening:** Josh took a deep breath and recognized the cycle they were in. He saw his own anxiety driving the conversation and Priscilla's defensiveness building. He knew nothing good was going to result if they kept going.
- o **Accept your part in the cycle:** He paused, acknowledging his role. "I'm sorry, Priscilla. I know I'm putting a lot of pressure on you right now." Priscilla looked up, surprised by his shift in tone. She felt a slight relief but remained cautious.
- o **Name the cycle:** Josh continued, "I think we're falling into the Penny Dreadful" (their agreed-upon name for the negative cycle that got the best of them, leaving them both feeling frustrated, hurt, and disconnected).
- o **Engage toward healthy relating:** Josh, with a softer tone, said, "I get anxious about money, and I push you, wanting some kind of solution, which makes you feel attacked and want to pull away."

Priscilla nodded slowly. "Yeah, and then I feel like I need to defend myself because I'm already trying so hard."

Josh reached out and took Priscilla's hand. "Let's find a way to work on this together. I don't want to make you feel bad. Maybe we can sit down another time and look at our budget together, see where we can adjust things without it feeling like a blame game."

Priscilla squeezed his hand, appreciating his effort to change the dynamic. "Okay. I can do that. I want to help and don't want us to fight about this."

They finished their dinner, appreciative that they didn't allow Penny Dreadful to have the last word. The next evening, they sat down and approached the budget conversation as a team rather than adversaries. By using the SANE method—seeing what was happening, accepting their parts in the cycle, naming the negative pattern, and engaging in healthier behaviors—Josh and Priscilla managed to stop the negative cycle in its tracks and strengthen their connection. You and your partner can use the SANE approach when the negative cycle starts to rear its ugly head.

HANDOUTS AND WORKSHEETS
FROM

Beyond Fairy Tales

SIX STEPS TO A HEALTHY TIME-OUT

There are times in our relationships when it feels like we're in full-blown code red. The negative cycle spins out of control, and just one more sharp criticism or defensive comment could tip us into chaos. You'll know it when voices start climbing, your heart starts racing, frustration and anger are off the charts, and both of you are too overwhelmed to really hear each other. The words flying back and forth are like verbal daggers, and our muscles tense up as if we're bracing for a raging storm. What's needed now is a healthy time-out.



SIX STEPS TO A HEALTHY TIME-OUT

STEP 1. RECOGNIZE THE EMOTIONAL AND PHYSIOLOGICAL ALARM BELLS.

Identify when your emotions are taking over and signaling the need for a pause. Pay attention to these cues:

- o **Increased heart rate:** Notice if your heart is pounding or racing.
- o **Physical tension:** Be aware of clenched fists, a tight jaw, or stiff shoulders.
- o **Rapid breathing:** Recognize shallow or fast breathing.
- o **Negative thoughts:** Pay attention to spiraling or racing negative thoughts.
- o **Withdrawal urge:** Feel the impulse to walk away or shut down emotionally.
- o **Overwhelming sadness:** Notice if you experience a surge of tears or an urge to cry.
- o **Intense anger:** Notice when anger is becoming overwhelming and difficult to control.

STEP 2. COMMUNICATE THE NEED WITH LOVE

Go through the SANE steps. Then, gently express the need for a time-out, framing it as a step toward reconnection. Keep in mind that individuals with avoidant tendencies are more inclined to want to take time-outs. In contrast, those with anxious tendencies can find time-outs anxiety-provoking and may experience feelings of abandonment. Therefore, the person initiating the time-out must consider their partner's emotional needs and attachment style. Here are some ways you might communicate the need for a time-out:

- o *"I sense we're both getting overwhelmed and caught in a negative cycle (or use the name you've given it). Please know that I love you. Can we take a pause to calm down and reconnect? I promise to come back and discuss these concerns with you."*
- o *"I care about you and want to be fully present, but right now, I'm feeling overwhelmed. Let's take a break and revisit this conversation later."*
- o *"I care about resolving this with you, but I need a moment to gather my thoughts. Let's take a time-out and try again shortly."*

SIX STEPS TO A HEALTHY TIME-OUT

STEP 3. SET A SAFE TIME FRAME

Agree on a specific, short duration for the time-out to ensure it's a step toward healing. This is a crucial step, as it prevents stonewalling and withdrawal without a clear plan to reengage. By providing a specific time to resume the conversation, you can ease your partner's nervous system, assuring them their concerns will be addressed:

- o "Let's take twenty minutes to cool down and then check back in."
- o "I need some time to calm myself. Can we revisit this in an hour?"

If you return and still find it difficult to discuss the issue calmly, consider these options:

- o **Take another break:** Step away again to allow more time to cool down. "I know I said I would be back in twenty minutes, but I still don't feel very calm. Give me another twenty, and I promise we can talk again."
- o **Schedule a follow-up:** Agree on a specific time, such as the next day, to revisit the discussion. "I know I said I'd be back in twenty minutes, but I still don't feel very calm. Can we discuss this topic tomorrow at 8:00 am? Is that okay?"



SIX STEPS TO A HEALTHY TIME-OUT

STEP 4. SELF-SOOTHE AND REFLECT

During a time-out, it's easy for the mind to ruminate and for negative narratives to keep looping. Use this time to calm your emotional storm and distressing thoughts. Engage in nurturing activities to restore your balance. When you feel ready, practice reflective empathy and consider the deeper needs and fears underlying the conflict between you both using any of these approaches:

- o **Identifying your needs:** Consider what you need to feel safe and connected again.
- o **Calming activities:** Engage in practices like deep breathing, meditation, or gentle yoga.
- o **Physical exercise:** Take a walk or do some light exercise, ensuring you inform your partner when you'll be back.
- o **Expressive writing:** Write down your thoughts and feelings to release pent-up emotions, then discard the letter.
- o **Emotional reflection:** Reflect on what emotions are being triggered and explore why.



SIX STEPS TO A HEALTHY TIME-OUT

STEP 5. RETURN WITH VULNERABILITY

When you come back together, approach the conversation with openness and a willingness to share your deeper feelings and more tempered thoughts. Remember that prioritizing the relationship's well-being is wiser than focusing on the need to be right. Take turns to cross the bridge into each other's experiences using this approach:

- Listen empathetically to your partner's feelings and needs.
- Share what you discovered about your emotions, thoughts, and needs during the break.
- Discuss what you can agree on.
- Articulate, in a nondefensive manner, where you differ.

STEP 6. AIM FOR A FELT SENSE OF RECONNECTION

Ensure that the reconnection focuses on understanding and supporting each other by doing the following:

- Emphasize the goal of emotional connection and safety.
- Validate each other's emotions and express empathy.
- Take responsibility for your actions and apologize, if it feels right to do so.
- Work together to address the underlying emotional needs or problems.

We can stop the negative cycle before it escalates. Yes, change is hard—really, really hard. Yet, with enough awareness and practice, we can increase what couples expert Mona Fishbane calls “free won’t,” a subset of free will. Fishbane states, “While much of our behavior is automatic and unconscious, conscious processes allow us to override our impulses and make behavioral choices that are in keeping with our ideals. And with enough practice, our conscious goals may themselves become automatic.”³ With enough practice, we can thwart the negative cycle and engage the SANE method and a healthy time-out with greater ease. While one person can learn and apply these principles and practices to make a difference in their relationship, the chances of success skyrocket when both partners jump on board.

Beyond Fairy Tales

EIGHT ESSENTIAL STEPS TO HEALING CONVERSATIONS

Sue Johnson, the developer of Emotionally Focused Therapy defines an attachment injury as “a sense of betrayal and/or abandonment at a key moment of need that, if not addressed and healed, undermines trust and connection and triggers or fuels relationship distress and partner insecurity.” If you ever felt let down by your partner during a critical time of need, such as a health crisis, childbirth, parental loss, job loss, or accident, or discovered infidelity, leading you to view your partner negatively and eroding your trust, that could be an attachment injury. They act as poisoned arrows to the heart, a form of insidious trauma that lingers in the mind, body, and nervous system, often resurfacing with potency during conflicts.

To effectively address and heal attachment injuries, we need to confront them directly. Ignoring these deep-seated wounds won't make them disappear; instead, it allows them to fester and negatively impact our relationships. **Thankfully, we can use research-based steps to heal these injuries and restore the fractured bonds.** Based on that research, I've created my own steps for conversations that help you both heal from relational injuries. Note that each step indicates which partner does the communicating in that step.

STEP 1. CREATE A SAFE SPACE (BOTH PARTNERS)

- A Set the scene:** Find a comfortable, private place where both of you feel safe to talk openly. This could be a quiet room at home, a peaceful spot in a park, or any location where you both feel relaxed and undisturbed. Turn off gadgets to minimize distractions.
- B Establish ground rules:** Agree to listen to each other without interrupting or judging. This is about understanding, not blaming. Set specific guidelines such as taking turns to speak, using “I” statements to express feelings, and avoiding accusatory language.
- C Agree upon a structure:** Recognize that both of you may have attachment injuries. Agree on who will share first and who will be the primary listener. Focus on addressing one injury at a time to avoid feeling overwhelmed.
- D Set an intention:** Before you start, take a moment to breathe and set an intention to communicate effectively and engage in empathetic listening. This helps create a mindful and compassionate atmosphere for your discussion.

EIGHT ESSENTIAL STEPS TO HEALING CONVERSATIONS

STEP 2. RECOGNIZE AND DESCRIBE THE INJURY (HURT PARTNER)

What happened? Pinpoint the specific incident or series of events that caused the hurt. It might be a betrayal, abandonment, or a situation in which one partner felt deeply hurt. When sharing with your partner, be precise about the details of the events as you understand them.

STEP 3. SHARE YOUR FEELINGS (HURT PARTNER)

While you may have already shared a general overview of the event, now open up about the specific feelings you experienced. Were you angry, sad, fearful, hurt, betrayed, frustrated, or lonely? Explain how the event impacted you emotionally and affected your trust and security in the relationship. Be honest and vulnerable, sharing your deepest feelings and fears.

EXAMPLES:

“I was outraged and felt seriously betrayed when I found out you lied to me. It shattered my sense of security in our relationship, and I’m scared it will happen again.”

- “Your absence during a time I needed you most made me feel incredibly lonely and sad. It felt like you didn’t care about what I was going through, and that’s made it hard for me to rely on you.”
- “When your family disrespected me at the dinner table, and you didn’t say anything to defend me, I felt humiliated and unsupported. It made me feel like you didn’t value me or our relationship enough to stand up for me. That moment has left me feeling hurt and vulnerable, and it’s been hard for me to feel secure around your family since then.”
- “When I discovered the affair, I felt utterly devastated and betrayed. It was like my whole world fell apart.”

[Note to the listening partner: Really listen. Your job is to understand your partner’s pain and show that you care about their feelings. Avoid interrupting or defending yourself. If you find yourself thinking, “Well, that’s not how it happened,” pause and return to your intention of listening to your partner. Feel into their pain. Imagine what it must have been like for them.]

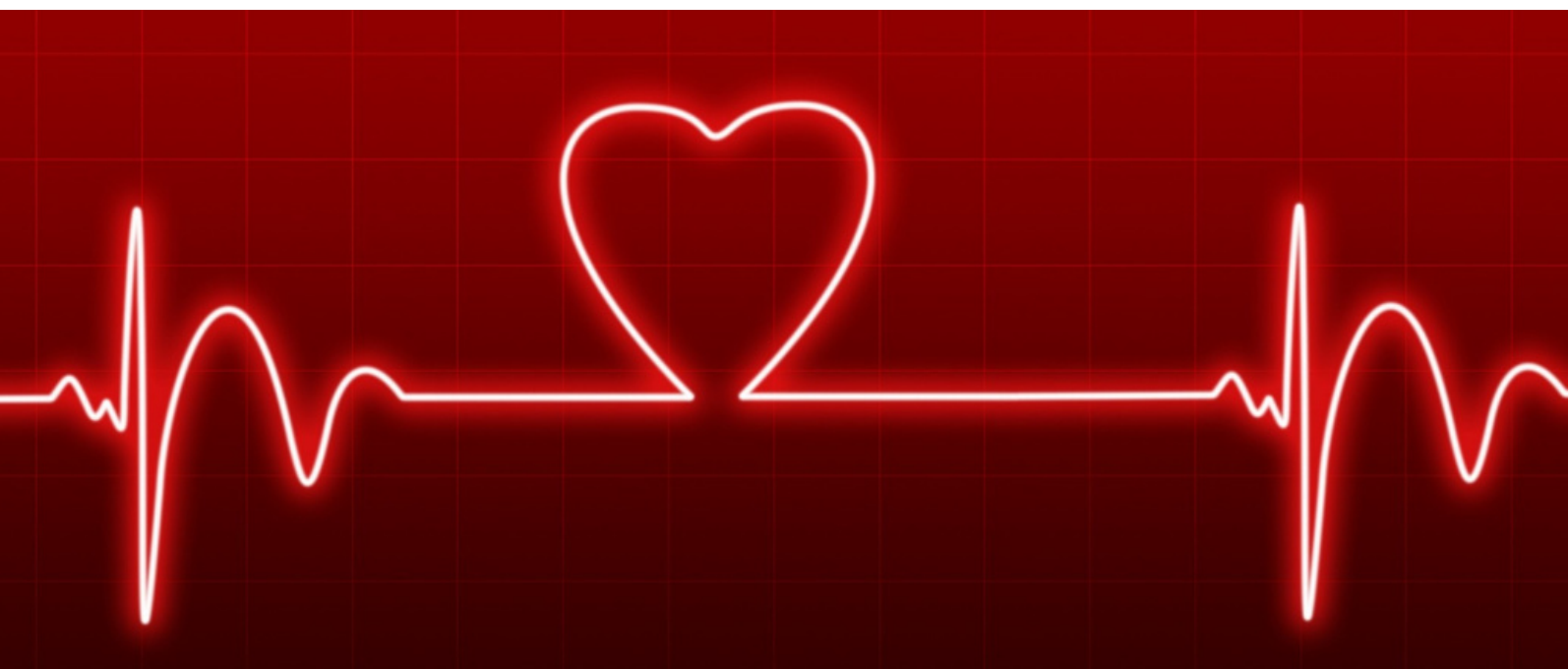
EIGHT ESSENTIAL STEPS TO HEALING CONVERSATIONS

STEP 4. EXPRESS YOUR DEEPER NEEDS (HURT PARTNER)

Talk about your deeper needs and fears behind the hurt. It's not just about the event itself and the feelings it elicited, but what it meant for your sense of trust, security, and connection. Discuss the underlying issues and emotional needs that were triggered.

EXAMPLES:

- “When you didn’t show up, I felt like I couldn’t rely on you, which made me feel scared and alone. I need to know that I can rely on you to be there when you say you will.”
- “When you didn’t defend me in front of your family, it made me feel unimportant and unsupported. I need to know that you have my back and that I matter to you.”
- “When you forgot our anniversary, I felt neglected and unappreciated. I need to know that our relationship is important to you and that you cherish our special moments.”
- “When you had the affair, it shattered my trust and made me feel worthless. I need to understand why it happened and to feel reassured that it won’t happen again so I can feel secure in our relationship.”



EIGHT ESSENTIAL STEPS TO HEALING CONVERSATIONS

STEP 5. SHOW EMPATHY, CHECK IN, AND TAKE RESPONSIBILITY (WHAT THE PARTNER WHO DID THE HURTING MUST DO)

- A Empathize:** As the partner who caused the hurt, try to genuinely understand and feel the other's pain. Show that you truly grasp the depth of their hurt and that it matters to you.

EXAMPLES:

- "I can see how much it hurt you when I didn't show up. It must have made you feel so scared and alone, and I'm really sorry for my actions contributing to your pain."
 - "When you say that you felt unsupported when I didn't defend you, I realize how that made you feel unimportant. I understand now how crucial it is for you to feel I have your back."
 - "I can only imagine how devastated and betrayed you felt when you found out about the affair. I see how deeply that hurt you, and I am so sorry for the pain I caused."
 - "I understand that ignoring your feelings during our argument made you feel dismissed and unloved. I see now how important it is for you to feel heard and valued."
- B Check in:** Now that you have empathized with the hurt partner, check in to ensure that you truly understand the heart of your partner's pain. This step is crucial for validating the hurt partner's feelings and ensuring effective communication.

EXAMPLES:

- "I want to make sure I'm really understanding you. Do you feel I'm getting to the heart of your pain?"
- "Can you tell me if there's anything I've missed or if there's more you need me to understand about how you felt?"
- "I hope I'm hearing you correctly. Is there anything else you want to share to better help me understand your feelings?"
- "Please let me know if there's more about how you're feeling that I need to understand. I want to make sure I'm fully here for you."

If the injured partner states that you understand their pain, proceed to step C below. If not, ask for clarification. After they share more, reflect back what they say and repeat Step A (Empathize).

EIGHT ESSENTIAL STEPS TO HEALING CONVERSATIONS

- C Own up:** Acknowledge your actions and their impact. Apologize sincerely, showing that you understand the hurt you caused. Avoid justifying your actions and focus on validating your partner's feelings.

EXAMPLES:

- “I am so sorry for not being there when you needed me. I understand now how my absence made you feel abandoned and hurt.”
- “I apologize for not defending you in front of my family. I see how that made you feel unsupported and unimportant, and it was wrong of me not to stand up for you.”
- “I am deeply sorry for having the affair. I know it shattered your trust and made you feel worthless, and I take full responsibility for the pain I caused you.”
- “I apologize for ignoring your feelings during our argument. I understand that it made you feel dismissed and unloved, and I regret making you feel that way.”



EIGHT ESSENTIAL STEPS TO HEALING CONVERSATIONS

STEP 6. REASSURE AND REACH OUT (THE PARTNER WHO CAUSED THE HURT)

- A Reassure:** The hurt partner needs reassurance that their feelings matter and that you are committed to making things right. Provide verbal affirmations and consistent, caring actions to rebuild trust

EXAMPLES:

- Your feelings are really important to me, and I'm committed to making things right between us."
- "I understand how much this hurt you, and I want you to know that I'm here for you and will do everything I can to rebuild your trust."
- "I value our relationship deeply and will work hard to ensure you feel safe and supported."
- "Your pain matters to me, and I am dedicated to changing my behavior and showing you that you can rely on me."

- B Reach out:** Ask what your partner needs to be comforted in the moment.

EXAMPLES:

- "What can I do right now to help you feel more comfortable and supported?"
- "Is there something specific you need from me to feel reassured and cared for?"
- "How can I show you in this moment that I am here for you and genuinely care about your feelings?"
- "Please tell me what you need from me right now to feel more at ease and comforted."

STEP 7. RESPOND WITH APPRECIATION AND HONESTY (WHAT THE HURT PARTNER MUST DO)

- A Privilege the positive:** Let your partner know that you are thankful for their compassionate presence and for listening to your concerns. Highlighting the positive aspects of the interaction helps reinforce the behavior and encourages continued empathy and understanding. Acknowledge the effort your partner is making to mend the relationship, which can help build a foundation of trust and healing.

EXAMPLES:

- “Thank you for really listening to me and being here for me. It means a lot to feel heard and understood.”
- “I appreciate you taking the time to understand my feelings and showing that you care. It helps me feel more connected to you.”
- “Your willingness to hear me out and empathize with my pain is very important to me. Thank you for making the effort to support me.”
- “I’m grateful for your patience and effort in being present with me during this conversation. It shows me that you’re committed to our relationship.”

- A Be honest in love:** If you still feel raw and cannot fully trust, extend appreciation while expressing your mixed feelings. Acknowledge the part of you that can take in what they said and the part that finds it difficult. If you feel hopeful, share that as well.

EXAMPLES:

- “I appreciate everything you’ve said. There’s a part of me that’s still struggling to trust completely. But there’s also a part of me that feels reassured.”
- “Thank you for your understanding and empathy. I want to believe in your commitment to change, but part of me is still hurt and finding it hard to trust. At the same time, I can feel some hope.”
- “I’m grateful for your apology and efforts to make things right. While I still need time to heal and fully trust again, I do feel a sense of hope.”
- “Your words mean a lot to me, but a part of me is still guarded and finding it hard to believe completely. However, I also feel some comfort and appreciate your patience as I work through these feelings.”

STEP 8. REINFORCE YOUR PROGRESS (BOTH PARTNERS)

Celebrate wins: Acknowledge the progress you’ve made. Remember, healing takes time, so celebrate small victories along the way. Recognize and appreciate each other’s efforts and improvements.

Keep connecting: Continue having these open, honest conversations regularly to reinforce the healing that has taken place.

HANDOUTS AND WORKSHEETS
FROM

*Beyond
Fairy Tales*

GUIDED MEDITATION: DISCOVERING YOUR INNER CHILD



Beyond Fairy Tales

GUIDED MEDITATION: DISCOVERING YOUR INNER CHILD

This meditation is designed to help you connect with that inner child by revisiting a moment of conflict with your partner. An audio file of this meditation can be found at:

<https://markgregorykarris.com/meditations-from-beyond-fairy-tales/>

Find a quiet and comfortable place where you won't be disturbed. Remember that this practice may bring up strong emotions. Be gentle with yourself as you explore these memories and feelings. Sit or lie down in a relaxed position and gently close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths, allowing yourself to settle into this moment. Let go of any tension or distractions, and bring your focus inward.

RECALL A MOMENT OF CONFLICT

- Begin by bringing to mind a recent moment of conflict with your partner. Visualize the situation as vividly as you can. Notice where you are, what is happening, and how you interact with your partner.

NOTICE THE WORST PART

- As you revisit this conflict, focus on the worst part of the experience. What aspect of the conflict felt most distressing or painful? Allow yourself to fully experience that moment again.

OBSERVE YOUR FEELINGS

- Notice the feelings that arise as you focus on this moment. What emotions come up for you? Is it anger, sadness, fear, frustration, or something else? Simply observe these emotions without judgment.

GUIDED MEDITATION: DISCOVERING YOUR INNER CHILD

SENSE YOUR BODY

- Shift your attention to your body. Notice any sensations that accompany these feelings. Where do you feel tension or discomfort? Is it in your chest, stomach, throat, or elsewhere? Pay close attention to these physical sensations

IDENTIFY SELF-BELIEFS

- Now, identify what you believe about yourself in this moment of conflict. Complete the sentence: "I am ____." Do you feel unloved, unworthy, unsafe, powerless, or something else? Allow this belief to come to the surface.

JOURNEY BACK IN TIME

- Take all of the sensations, feelings, and beliefs about yourself, and gently allow your mind to take you back to when you were a child. Try to remember a moment from your childhood when you felt a similar way. What memory comes to mind?

EXPLORE THE MEMORY

- Once a memory emerges, stay with it for a while. Notice the details of the memory. Where are you? Who is with you? What is happening? Allow yourself to fully experience this memory as if you are there again. If remaining in the memory becomes too overwhelming, take a pause and engage in a calming activity.

CONNECT WITH YOUR INNER CHILD

- As you connect with this memory, recognize that this is your inner child, a younger version of yourself who holds these feelings and beliefs. Notice what your inner child needs in this moment. Is it comfort, reassurance, love, or something else?

OFFER COMPASSION AND UNDERSTANDING

- Take a moment to offer compassion and understanding to your inner child. Imagine giving them what they need. Visualize yourself holding them, comforting them, and providing the love and support they may not have received at the time.

INTEGRATION

- When you are ready, gently bring your awareness back to the present moment. Take a few deep breaths, and slowly open your eyes. Reflect on the insights you have gained from this meditation. Observe any similarities between your feelings with your partner and those you have with the person or persons in your memory. How can understanding your inner child's experience help you navigate conflicts with your partner more compassionately?

As you finish this meditation, take a moment to honor the work you've done. Recognize the courage it takes to face these tender parts of yourself. Remember, each step toward understanding and nurturing your inner child brings more compassion into your relationships. By caring for your inner child, you're fostering a healthier, more loving connection with yourself. Take a deep breath, and as you exhale, release any remaining tension, feeling a sense of peace and connection within.

If taking part in this meditation didn't dredge up any early childhood memories, I get it. I really do. Sometimes, tapping into our imaginative selves feels like trying to catch smoke with our bare hands. And for some of us, our deepest wounds and the pesky beliefs they plant aren't anchored in our earliest years. They might be tangled up in later experiences, shaped by those influential moments or relationships as we stumbled through life.

So, if a childhood memory didn't bubble to the surface, don't worry. Maybe take a detour through the backroads of your adolescent or adult life. Think about those moments that packed an emotional punch and felt like a traumatic incident, whether they involved friends, romantic partners, mentors, or other family members. These memories can be like little treasure maps, offering clues about your core schemas and how you navigate relationships today.

Beyond Fairy Tales

WHAT ARE YOUR CORE VALUES?

In relationships, truly loving your partner goes beyond mere emotions; it involves embodying your deepest values and living them out daily. By knowing and committing to these values, you create a foundation of trust, respect, and meaningful connection, not only with yourself but also with your partner. “Valued loving” invites us to remain true to our values, regardless of how we feel or what our partner does or doesn’t do.

In case you’re unaware of your values, here’s a list to help you. As you consider each, identify your top five in terms of their importance to you within your relationship. Then, rank them in order.



WHAT ARE YOUR CORE VALUES?

- ☐ **Respect:** Treating your partner with dignity and consideration, valuing their opinions and feelings, even during disagreements.
- ☐ **Trust:** Building and maintaining a foundation of reliability and honesty, ensuring your partner feels safe and secure in the relationship.
- ☐ **Empathy:** Understanding and sharing your partner's emotions, showing genuine care and concern for their experiences and perspectives.
- ☐ **Patience:** Allowing your partner the time and space to grow, make mistakes, and learn without rushing or pressuring them.
- ☐ **Kindness:** Consistently demonstrating thoughtfulness and compassion, making a daily habit of small acts of love and consideration.
- ☐ **Authenticity:** Being your true self with your partner, fostering a relationship based on honesty and genuine connection.
- ☐ **Support:** Actively encouraging and uplifting your partner in their personal and professional endeavors, standing by them through challenges and successes.
- ☐ **Forgiveness:** Letting go of grudges and resentments and being willing to move forward after misunderstandings or conflicts.
- ☐ **Commitment:** Showing dedication and loyalty to your partner, prioritizing the relationship, and working together to overcome obstacles.
- ☐ **Communication:** Engaging in open, honest, and respectful dialogue with your partner, ensuring both voices are heard and understood.
- ☐ **Gratitude:** Regularly expressing appreciation for your partner and the relationship, recognizing and celebrating the positives.
- ☐ **Flexibility:** Being willing to adapt and compromise, understanding that relationships require give and take to thrive.
- ☐ **Integrity:** Upholding strong moral principles in your actions and decisions, ensuring your behavior aligns with your values.

WHAT ARE YOUR CORE VALUES?

- ☐ **Joy:** Creating and sharing moments of happiness and fun, bringing lightness and positivity into the relationship.
- ☐ **Generosity:** Giving your time, energy, and resources freely, showing your partner that their well-being is important to you.
- ☐ **Humility:** Acknowledging your own flaws and mistakes, being open to feedback, and striving to improve the relationship.
- ☐ **Responsibility:** Taking ownership of your actions and their impact on your partner, being accountable for maintaining a healthy relationship.
- ☐ **Adventurousness:** Embracing new experiences and challenges together—fostering a sense of excitement and growth in the relationship.
- ☐ **Justice:** Treating your partner fairly and standing up for what is right, ensuring equity and fairness in your relationship dynamics.
- ☐ **Intimacy:** Cultivating a deep emotional and physical connection, ensuring that both of you feel loved, cherished, and understood.
- ☐ **Spirituality:** Sharing and supporting each other's spiritual beliefs and practices, fostering a sense of shared purpose and deeper connection.
- ☐ **Intellectual Stimulation:** Engaging in meaningful and thought-provoking conversations, challenging each other's minds, and fostering a dynamic intellectual connection.

Incorporating the concept of valued loving into your relationship can be profoundly transformative. Start by identifying your core values and sharing them with your partner, fostering open and honest communication about what matters most to each of you. You can even print them out and put them on your fridge. Or, you can create a reminder on your phone to remind you every day. Then, make a conscious effort to embody these values in your daily interactions.

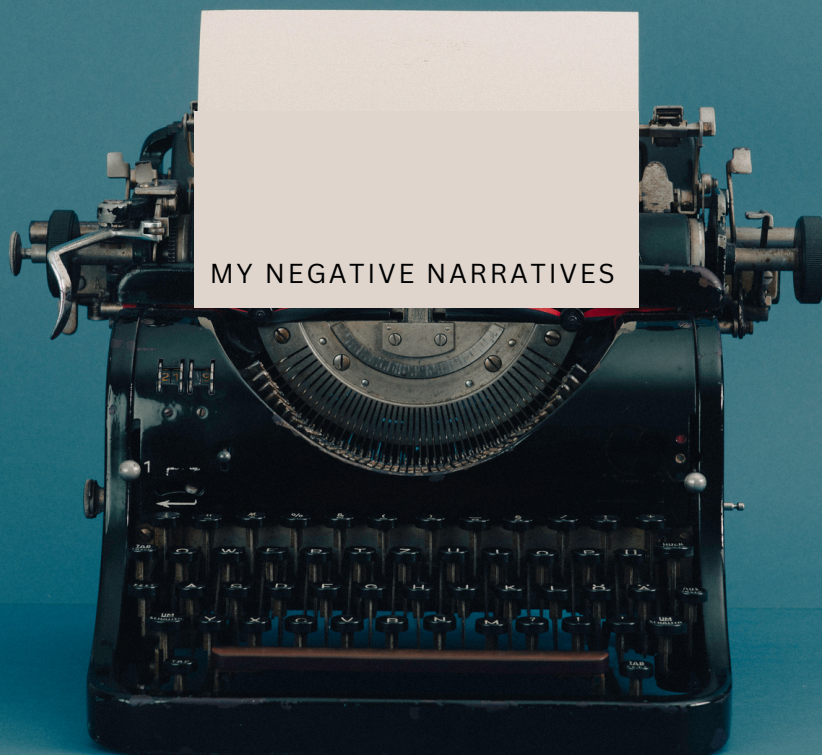


HANDOUTS AND WORKSHEETS
FROM

Beyond Fairy Tales

WHAT NEGATIVE SEXUAL NARRATIVES ARE YOU CARRYING?

Often, we lug around old stories and beliefs into our relationships, stories that have nothing to do with our partners and everything to do with the baggage we've been carrying since we were young. These oppressive ideas come from all sorts of places—our families, cultures, religions—and shape how we see ourselves and each other, often stifling us and squashing the spark of sexual intimacy. They create walls where there should be windows, keeping us from loving ourselves, talking openly, savoring pleasure, respecting each other, and truly connecting. Here are some of the outdated, constricting, and frequently destructive narratives that individuals and couples have shared with me:



NEGATIVE NARRATIVES

- 1.** “Women should be submissive and pleasing.” The expectation that women must always prioritize their partner’s pleasure over their own diminishes fulfillment and autonomy. It suppresses their true selves, reducing vibrant individuals to mere shadows. This obsolete narrative confines women to outdated roles, stifling personal growth, happiness, and genuine sexual intimacy.
- 2.** “Real men don’t express vulnerability.” This harmful narrative discourages men from showing emotional vulnerability, creating a barrier to deep emotional and sexual intimacy. It forces them into solitary confinement with their own emotions, perpetuating a damaging ideal of masculinity. As a result, men become isolated from genuine, holistic connections, reducing their ability to be fully present and embodied lovers.
- 3.** “Women’s bodies belong to their husbands.” This belief, often found in religious communities, disregards a woman’s autonomy and consent, treating her body as her husband’s property. It strips away her sense of self, turning partnership into ownership. This narrative undermines mutual respect and equality, degrading the foundation of healthy sexual intimacy.



NEGATIVE NARRATIVES

- 4.** “Men desire sex more than women do.” This stereotype invalidates women’s sexual desires and invokes shame if they have a high sexual desire. It can also cause men who don’t have a high sex drive to feel shame. The idea that men desire more sex than women reduces the rich spectrum of sexual expression to a simplistic and harmful stereotype, undermining mutual satisfaction and understanding.
- 5.** “Sex should always be perfect.” The unrealistic expectation that every sexual encounter must be flawless creates pressure and disappointment. Porn is a significant contributor to this narrative as it overlooks the beauty of imperfection, turning intimacy into a performance. This narrative places undue stress on partners, detracting from genuine, enjoyable sexual experiences.
- 6.** “Having sexual fantasies is wrong.” Shame or guilt associated with sexual fantasies can inhibit open communication and sexual expression. It locks away a part of our imagination that can bring excitement and connection. This narrative stifles creativity and honest dialogue in intimate relationships, limiting sexual fulfillment.
- 7.** “My sexual past defines my sexual future.” Allowing previous negative experiences or mistakes to dictate future sexual relationships traps individuals in a story already written without a chance to write new chapters. It denies the possibility of growth, healing, and starting afresh. This narrative chains individuals to their past, preventing them from embracing a hopeful and fulfilling sexual future.
- 8.** “There’s a ‘normal’ amount of sex couples should have.” Comparing one’s sex life to perceived norms creates unnecessary pressure and dissatisfaction. Such comparisons often make individuals feel either less than or better than others, reducing intimacy to a numbers game instead of reveling in the unique rhythm of each relationship. This narrative fosters unrealistic comparisons that undermine sexual satisfaction and intimacy.
- 9.** “Talking about sex is embarrassing or taboo.” Avoiding open communication about sexual needs, desires, and boundaries stifles intimacy. It creates a barrier to understanding and deeply connecting with each other. This narrative perpetuates shame, silence, and misunderstanding—a formula for undermining intimate bonds and sexual fulfillment.

NEGATIVE NARRATIVES



10. “Purity or punishment awaits.” Emphasizing abstinence to the point of instilling fear and shame around sexuality, as seen in the religious context of “purity culture,” leads to difficulties in sexual relationships even after marriage. It plants seeds of anxiety that grow into barriers to intimacy. This narrative leverages the power of fear, resulting in long-term sexual and emotional issues.

11. “Divorce and remarriage are immoral, even in cases of abuse.” Trapping individuals in harmful, abusive, or dysfunctional relationships due to religious prohibitions against divorce and remarriage is deeply damaging. It prioritizes dogma over individual well-being, perpetuating harm. This narrative sacrifices personal safety and happiness, severely impacting sexual and emotional intimacy.

12. “Homosexuality is an abomination.” Denying and stigmatizing LGBTQI+ identities and relationships cause significant emotional and psychological harm. It marginalizes people for who they love, creating unnecessary suffering. This narrative spreads intolerance and pain, blocking the path to acceptance, equality, and healthy sexual intimacy.

13. “Sexual pleasure is sinful.” Associating pleasure with sin creates fear and discomfort around sexual experiences. It shrouds a natural part of life in shame, hindering healthy sexual expression. This narrative condemns joy and connection, promoting guilt instead of acceptance and fulfilling intimacy.

14. “Men can’t control their sexual urges.” This belief is often touted to justify male promiscuity and inappropriate behavior, usually blaming women for “provoking” men. It excuses harmful behavior instead of promoting respect and self-control. This narrative absolves accountability, reinforcing damaging stereotypes and behaviors that undermine respectful and consensual intimacy.

HANDOUTS AND WORKSHEETS
FROM BEYOND

Fairy Tales

I imagine you cringed when you read many of these beliefs. And I also suspect that a couple of them might have rung a bell to you, at least to some degree. Our relationships are shaped by stories and beliefs we've carried long before we met our current partners. These old narratives are often stifling and shame-inducing, trapping us in patterns that prevent us from living pleasure-fully in our bodies and being our authentic selves. Family, culture, and religion are just a few sources of these oppressive ideas. To build healthier, more fulfilling relationships, we must recognize and challenge these damaging beliefs while crafting our own unique narratives.

IDENTIFY AND CHALLENGE YOUR DAMAGING BELIEFS

Below are some questions to help kickstart this healing journey. Take some time to reflect on them. If it feels comfortable to you, consider opening up a dialogue with your partner surrounding these harmful narratives, using these questions as a springboard:

1. Can you identify any specific beliefs or stereotypes from the list that have impacted your own experiences or behaviors in relationships?

2. How do you feel when encountering these harmful narratives in your life or in society? How do you typically respond to them?

3. How can self-compassion help you heal from the effects of these oppressive narratives?

4. What practical steps can you and your partner take to cultivate mutual respect, equality, and genuine intimacy in your relationship?

5. What empowering and positive narratives would you like to adopt to inspire your sexual journey, and how can these new beliefs enhance your intimacy and connection with your partner?

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