

## Learn How to P.A.I.R. U.P. with Mindfulness

### Instructions

Think of the following acronym P.A.I.R. U.P. as one way you can bring mindfulness in your life. Mindfulness doesn't mean things are going to be perfect; it accepts that sometimes things can get messy. But even then, you can *pair up* with these skills to find balance and a new perspective. Read and then answer the questions.

### P — *Present-Moment Participation*

When you whole-heartedly participate and engage with others, you build trust and make stronger connections and friendships.

### A — *Attuned Acceptance*

While you might not be able to control what happens in life, you can control your attitude. Cultivating acceptance offers greater calm; attunement means you can have empathy and a deeper understanding for others, even if they don't happen to agree with you. These are both keys to finding harmony with others.

### I — *Intentionality*

When you consciously choose how to act and speak each day, you invite a heart-centered approach to all relationships—whether at home or at work.

### R — *Reflection*

When you pause to reflect and investigate your relationships—as well as think about what values matter most deeply to you—you can get unstuck from old patterns, discover fresh insights, and move in new directions.

### U — *Understanding of Suffering*

When you realize that all persons suffer in some way, you gain a greater sense of patience and compassion for others.

### P — *Purposeful Partnership*

What if others supported your dreams, and vice versa? By finding your purpose and supporting others, you help grow a web of meaningful community partnership.

## Reflections

Which one of the skills would make a positive difference in your life right now, and why?

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Which skill feels most challenging to you, and why?

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Which of the skills do you currently use in your life and relationships?

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What would most change in your life if you could bring P.A.I.R. U.P. into it?

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# The Mindful Acceptance and Commitment Model of Change

How you view change can have an impact on whether or not you fully embrace it. This handout will introduce you to a mindfulness-oriented model of change that draws upon your uniqueness. Essentially, this model states that change begins by accepting your present condition, while at the same time committing to learning new skills that can actually rewire the neural network in your brain.

## How It Works

- Change starts with acceptance—rather than avoidance—of what is happening in your life right now that you want to change; also, this means accepting that stress increases a tendency to return to old habits.
- Change is collaborative and happens through relationship and experience.
- Success is defined as experiencing the process; it values learning from mistakes and accepts this as an important part of the process.
- Change requires a commitment to learning and practicing mindfulness-based skills over time.
- Change doesn't happen all at once, and the focus is on the day-by-day process rather than on some future outcome.

## Advantages of this Method

- Useful for complex, holistic human systems.
- A non-blaming, accepting, forgiving, and gentle style of change.
- Helps you understand the effects of stress on your behavior and life.
- Gives you the skills needed to create reliable change and prepare for learning from mistakes.
- Good for tracking and monitoring complexity.

As useful as the Acceptance-Commitment-Skill perspective is, it presents some special challenges. For example, it takes time and effort and requires patience. It may not be as fast as the mechanical-replacement change model, which could cause frustration or disappointment.

In the space below, write down what you think are the challenges you will face in using this model of change:

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In what area(s) of your life do you think this style of change might be useful?

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Name one way in which this model of change might make things easier for you or others.

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## Cultivating We-Thou Awareness

You might be amazed to know that 21st-century neuroscience affirms that each of us possesses a built-in system of specialized neurons located in the brain's frontal lobe—called mirror neurons—that links us to others. When you think about it, much suffering is caused by viewing things personally. Yes, it's easy to take things personally, but think for a moment how things might be different if you let go of the "I" perspective and experienced things through a "We" perspective.

What follows is just an exploration to see what a "We" perspective would feel like. To make that connection with others in a broader way, ask yourself the following questions. (And in case you're wondering: The "I" is always there, and you can always return to that perspective anytime you want to.)

### Reflections

How do you know when you are defending your inner sense of self, or ego? At such times, how does defending help or hinder how you connect with others?

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Do you remember a time when you felt that someone really understood you? What did that feel like, and how do you think they were able to see things from your point of view?

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What would be an advantage to truly seeing and experiencing things from another individual's point of view?

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Is there anything that concerns you about letting go of your own point of view and experiencing what another person is feeling? As mentioned above, you can always return to your own personal point of view at any time.

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## Be a Mindful Learning Style Detective

### Instructions

Mindful learning styles are much like language. They are a form of communication that is based on the innate ways that someone gets very present and attentive. For example, those who love looking at sunsets, going to art galleries, and watching the latest in fashion tend to be visual. By contrast, those who love dancing, going to concerts, and hearing the ocean waves tend to be sound and music oriented.

There are nine different ways of mindfully getting present—and each of us uses several of these styles. If your partner is accessing one style while you're accessing a different one, it might be hard to communicate or understand the needs of the other person—until you “speak” in their mindful learning style, or at least translate their style in a way that makes sense to you.

This is just an introduction to these styles. To get a more in-depth look at your primary and secondary mindful learning styles, consider looking at these websites:

- Edutopia's *Multiple Intelligences Self-Assessment*
  - <https://www.edutopia.org/multiple-intelligences-assessment>
- The *Rogers Indicator of Multiple Intelligences*
  - <http://www.personal.psu.edu/bxb11/MI/rimi2.htm>

Look at this list of the nine different mindful learning styles:

Verbal-Linguistic  
 Visual-Spatial  
 Sound-Musical  
 Bodily-Kinesthetic-Tactile  
 Mathematical-Science-Logical  
 Social-Interpersonal  
 Reflective-Intrapersonal  
 Natural World  
 Existential-Meaning

**Next, look at the following list and circle the words that describe the types of hobbies, activities, or things you find engaging and enjoyable.**

As you do this, think in terms of what you like to do during your free time or what you did on your last vacation. How did you spend your time? This will help you identify how you get present. Remember that mindful learning styles can be mixed. So taking a long walk by yourself on the beach, for example, could be visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, sound-musical, reflective-intrapersonal, and natural world oriented. That's not to say all of these are your primary style of getting present, but an activity might appeal to you because it taps more than one of your getting present styles!

**Language/Verbal & Thinking Oriented**

Likes the following: analyzing, reflecting, meditating, reading, writing, keeping a journal, crosswords, word games, puns, word jokes, speaking, listening, or telling stories.

**Visual/Spatial Oriented**

Likes the following: museums, art fairs, looking at sunsets, photography, painting, doodling, quilting, knitting, astronomy, motorcycling, bird watching, watching sports, fashion, looking at the stars, and nature.

**Sound/Hearing & Music Oriented**

Likes the following: music, concerts, dancing, singing, chanting, playing an instrument, sound of the ocean waves, and sounds of nature.

**Bodily/Kinesthetic & Tactile Oriented**

Likes the following: dancing, swimming, walking, yoga, stretching, hot baths, jogging, hiking, biking, knitting, weight lifting, painting, sculpting, jewelry making, scrap-booking, competitive and non-competitive sports.

**Mathematical/Science & Logical Oriented**

Likes the following: Sudoku, numbers, reading, computer programming, analyzing, going to museums, understanding how things work, science, learning, chess, games of strategy.

**Social/Interpersonal & Relationship Oriented**

Likes the following: friends, committed relationships, volunteering, book clubs, social gatherings, church activities, planning or going to parties, empathizing, teaching, public spaces, team sports.

**Reflective/Intrapersonal & Spirituality Oriented**

Likes the following: learning about oneself, praying, meditating, reading and reflecting, thinking about purpose and gratitude, going to lectures, spiritual/religious rituals, solitude, seeking out silence, nature, and wisdom.

**Natural World Oriented**

Likes the following: hiking, hunting, fishing, boating, the beach, camping, sailing, archaeology, natural shapes and objects, sitting in the park, farmers markets, and exploring new locations.

**Existential/Meaning Oriented**

Likes the following: learning, introspection, expressing ideas rather than rote learning, philosophy, dialogue, reading, prayer, meditation, rituals and ceremonies, transcendent thinking, and deeper meaning.

### Reflections

What was it like to identify how you get present? How long have you used this way to get present and express yourself?

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Which learning styles do you think are your key ones? When you think about how you best learn, which of these styles helps you to best remember or learn?

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Think of someone significant in your life, and underline the activities in the preceding list that you feel fits best with that person. How could an understanding of that person's style help you communicate more effectively with that person? What activities could you enjoy together?

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### Mindful Learning Style Practice

For the next week, see if you can identify the styles of others. Then, adapt so that you connect by using, or "speaking" their innate style. Notice how this changes the interaction or deepens your understanding of that person. For example, if someone is visual, you might use the phrase "I see what you mean." If someone is verbal-linguistic oriented, you might recall or share stories about an event that occurred. Get creative and notice how your new "language" resonates with your partner or others.



# Dropping Into the Body & Naming Emotions

## Instructions

Do you tune in to your body throughout the day? Getting familiar with the body is beneficial because the body offers much helpful information. Research shows that dropping into the body can help to quiet the busy mind, get us more aware of our emotions, and even help us grow calmer during times of stress. The practices here are simple, gentle ones that you can use anytime to get more centered or to take a soothing and stress-relieving one-minute body break. As you do this, you may also notice where tension builds up in the body.

The practice consists of two parts. Part 1 is about grounding and getting present in the body. Part 2 is about starting to know emotions through sensing the body. Let's try them now.

**Note:** This body practice is the first part of an overall Mindfulness Body/Breath/Mind Meditation that uses this tool along with Tool #13, *Breath Regulation for Managing Stress*, and Tool #14, *Mind Regulation for Making Peace with the Mind*. We'll learn these one at a time so you can start slowly, gain more practice, and understand the benefits of each.

## PART 1 — *Dropping Into the Body*

**Sitting** — Have a seat on a comfortable chair. If you want to sit on a cushion or on the ground with your legs crossed, that's perfectly fine.

1. To begin, get grounded, physically connected to the ground, or earth. To do this, press your feet into the floor. You can imagine that you are literally "rooting" yourself to the ground like your favorite tree or plant. Trees are among the largest living organisms on the planet, so imagine yourself strong and planted like a tree.
2. Now you are going to bring awareness to the body. First, take a few moments to notice the position of your knees and legs. Now, move up and notice the position of your hands and arms. They may be at your sides or rested on your legs or lap. Either way, just notice them.
3. Finally, bring awareness to your posture. How are you sitting? Ideally, it is good to have a nice erect but relaxed posture. Imagine, for example, that you were having a cup of tea with the Queen of England. How would you sit with the "Queen Mum"? (Now if that is an anxiety-provoking image for you, just ignore it!)
4. Now you are totally sitting—100 percent devoted to the experience of sitting. If your mind wanders, that's okay. Just gently bring it back to your feet on the floor and the position of your knees, legs, arms, hands, and posture. That's all there is to it.

*Natural Sitting and Natural Body.* It's perfect just as it is. You don't need to change a thing.

**Grounding the Hands** — Rub your hands together vigorously for 5–10 seconds or until heat builds up between the palms. As you're doing this, think about the rhetorical question: Is what

you're feeling yesterday? Is it today? Of course, there's no denying that what you are experiencing is the present moment. One of the benefits of a physical grounding practice is that it can turn us away from reactivity and negative thoughts to an experience in the body—right here, right now.

**Rolling the Shoulders and Head** — To release tension, roll your shoulders around (in either direction) at least five times. Do this slowly and when you are finished, let your shoulders come to rest, letting them fall as the tension leaves. Notice their position and how differently they feel after this movement. If you experience any pain, just stop or move your shoulders only as far as you can without discomfort.

Next, lower your head and roll it from side to side, stretching the muscles in your neck. Only go as far as you can comfortably move your head without having any pain.

**Overhead Arm Stretch** — For the last grounding practice, you are going to slowly move your arms high over your head as you take a nice long in-breath. Imagine your arms rising like the sun in the morning sky. Now, as you exhale, slowly lower your arms, letting them come to rest at your sides. Excellent! Congratulations on practicing body grounding. Again, go only as far as you can without discomfort.

### Reflections

What was it like for you to sit in this way? Did you notice that you had fewer thoughts or your mind got quieter when you were really “in” the body?

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Did you notice any difference in body tension before and after?

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What is one way that a daily mindful grounding practice could help deal with stress?

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Grounding is portable and can be done anywhere. How could you create a grounding practice? What would that look like? What challenges or obstacles would you face in implementing this?

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## PART 2 — Naming Emotions in the Body

### Instructions

Once you have practiced Part 1 start to tune in to any emotions you may be feeling. If you have never practiced naming or labeling emotions, this may take time for you, so be patient with the process.

For example, anger or frustration might be felt as tightness or clenching in the jaw, the hands, the chest, or another part of the body. Sadness or grief might be experienced as a lump in the throat, heaviness in the gut, or feeling like the weight of the world is on your shoulders. **In particular, use this practice whenever you are upset about something or have had a disruption in a relationship.**

Why is this worth learning? Research shows that if you can *name an emotion*, that you can *tame the emotion*. This is important in relationships, because it means that you can more easily *respond* rather than just *react*. Naming the emotions lets you think about your feelings, understand yourself better, and express your needs in a more thoughtful way—especially when dealing with difficult emotions and situations.

**Sitting** — Find a nice, quiet, private place where you can sit. As you sit, start from the bottom of your feet and move upward. Notice where there's any tension or tightness. If you sense something in the body, get curious about that sensation. Is this a familiar feeling? Is it unusual?

If you feel yourself getting tense, just take a nice long breath and exhale slowly. If you can't name the feeling right now, that's okay. You can always try again another time.

Sometimes there may be a feeling in the body that you've experienced for a long time. Gently ease into this sensation, without forcing it. If you feel an emotion arise—even a powerful one—that's okay. Just give that emotion a name. Remember that this is a process, a means of getting more familiar with your body's emotional life, its story, and how it communicates with you.

### Reflections

What was it like to name your emotions? What was most challenging?

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What is one positive change that could come from knowing your emotions? How could this affect a significant relationship in your life?

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## Getting Connected and Curious About the Breath

### Instructions

Did you ever think about how many breaths you take in the course of a day? The average person takes between 18,000 to 20,000 breaths a day—and no two of those breaths are alike. Just like snowflakes, each is unique. In this handout, you'll get more curious about the breath.

**Sit** — To begin, find a seat on a comfortable chair or cushion. You might want to avoid lying down as that could make you drowsy. Basically, you want to get settled into the body before practicing with the breath. So you might want to review the steps in Tool #12 for getting grounded by pressing your feet to the floor; bringing awareness to the positioning of the arms, legs, hands, and feet; and taking a nice erect and dignified but relaxed posture.

### Get Curious About the Breath

1. Now you are going to turn your awareness toward the breath. This is an easy practice. Just notice how each breath is slightly different from the one that preceded it. If a breath is longer, just make a note to yourself that "this is a longer breath." If a breath is shorter, note to yourself that "this is a short, or shorter, breath." You can even notice how the pause between each in-breath and out-breath is a little different from the one that came before.

Now, spend a few moments breathing and noticing the uniqueness of each breath.

2. Now that you've gotten more aware of each breath, it's time to get curious. This means you can notice whatever grabs your attention and go with it! For example, maybe you notice that the in-breath seems to start in a particular part of the body. Or maybe you notice how air feels cool when entering the nasal passages but is warmer when it leaves. There's no right or wrong way to notice the breath because your breath is unique.

So now, take a few moments to get curious about the breath.

### Natural Breathing

1. However you are breathing is perfect just as it is. You don't need to change a thing—isn't that nice to know? Just as the practice of sitting in Tool #12 was about devoting yourself 100 percent to the experience of sitting, you can devote yourself 100 percent to the experience of breathing. This is breathing with a sense of ease, without any effort, and without trying to change anything. And, if your mind wanders off somewhere, that's okay and quite normal. Just gently bring it back to each in-breath and out-breath.

***Remember, this is natural breathing, natural breath, and it's perfect just as it is.***

Enjoy this for a minute or two. Excellent.

### Find Your Breath Anchor

1. If someone says to you, “pay attention to the breath,” it’s easy to get distracted because you don’t have anything specific to focus on while breathing. That’s why you’re going to find an “anchor point” with the breath—a specific place in the body where you most notice or feel the breath. To find this anchor point, you are going to ask yourself the following: *Where in the body do I most vividly notice the physical sensation of breath?*

There’s no one place where people most notice the breath. There are many places, such as at the tip of the nostrils where the air enters, inside the nasal passages, in the back of the throat, in the expansion of the chest or belly, even the movement of the shoulders or the back. Some people experience the breath as a visual color or image. Also, this anchor can be in one place or multiple places.

2. So right now, let’s spend a few moments as you find your own personal anchor point with the breath.

Good. Now that you’ve found that anchor point, let’s see what it’s like to stay with it—to focus your attention on it for the full duration of a breath: The in-breath, the pause, and the out-breath. Take that anchor point breath now.

Placing your attention on this anchor point is an important part of a mindful breathing meditation. But know, too, that your anchor point can change. For example, you might have noticed your breath moving even as you did the anchor practice. It might have started higher in the chest and then dropped into the belly. That’s perfectly okay. And it means that you are being present and noticing the anchor point where it is right now. As you continue to practice working with the breath—such as with the belly breathing in Tool #20, *Self-Soothing and Synchronized Breathing*—you might find that the anchor shifts.

Congratulations on exploring your breath! Now that you’ve learned this skill, you’re ready to move on to Part 3 of the Mindfulness Body/Breath/Mind in Tool #14, *Mind Regulation for Making Peace with the Mind*.

### Reflections

Where in the body did you most vividly sense the breath? Was this familiar to you? Or was it surprising?

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How did having an “anchor point” with the breath help you stay focused?

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What did you like most about noticing your breath in this way? What was most challenging?

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# Making Peace with the Mind

## Instructions

Use this as a stand-alone practice or as part of an overall Mindfulness Body/Breath/Mind Meditation that combines Tools #12, #13, and #14.

The purpose of the Mindfulness Body/Breath/Mind Meditation is to maintain focus on the present moment with whatever is happening in the body, breath, and mind. With the meditation, you'll be focusing attention on the breath, but you'll notice that the mind inevitably wanders off. This may happen a lot, or a little. Either way, when it does, you'll cultivate the ability to simply observe the mind's wanderings, as if from a safe distance. Then, you'll *redirect your attention back to the anchor point with the breath*. It's that easy.

Well, it's not really *that* easy. It takes time, effort, and practice, but wherever you are on this journey, it's the best place for you to be. To begin, do this for two to five minutes, just to see how it feels. Ideally, you can build up to 10 minutes a day to get maximum benefit for helping cultivate constructive distance from thoughts—especially negative ones.

Find a quiet place where you can sit undisturbed. If you have a timer, you can use that to set the length of time.

**Sitting** — Center in the body as you learned in Tool #12, *Body Regulation for Grounding and Attention*. You can always start by pressing your feet into the floor, noticing the position of your legs, knees, arms, hands, and posture. Allow yourself to feel as if you've come home, fully at rest and grounded in the body.

**Breathing** — Next, connect with the breath as described in Tool #13, *Breath Regulation for Managing Stress*. Find where you most vividly notice the sensation of breath in the body *right now*. If the anchor point changes, that's okay. What's important is that you have a place to focus attention on as you do this practice.

**Getting to Know the Mind** — Did you stop to count your thoughts this morning? I like to raise that question in workshops. It usually gets a laugh because the idea of counting our thoughts seems almost impossible. Scientists report a range of thoughts that can be experienced per second—from 25 to 125 thoughts per second. The Buddha thought we could have as many as 3,000 thought moments in a single second. Once, when I mentioned this in a workshop, a participant raised her hand and said, "I have four thousand!" She might be right. As you do this practice have patience, and know that it's okay if you notice a lot of thoughts. Most people do. The idea here is not to stop your thoughts or "empty your mind." Instead, it's just to get to know your thoughts and cultivate awareness of your mind wandering. By noticing when your mind wanders, you'll be able to gently redirect your attention and focus back to the body and the breath.

**Disengage from Thoughts by Labeling Mind Wandering** — There are many kinds of mind wandering. You might wander off to a thought about the past or something that happened earlier in the day. Maybe you are thinking about something that you have to do later in the day. Or, you might

be having a self-referential thought—such as wondering if you’re doing this meditation correctly. Even a self-critical thought is just another form of mind wandering that has taken you away from paying attention to the breath.

Fortunately, there’s an easy way to disengage from mind wandering and return your focus to the breath. The method is to simply name, or label, your mind wandering. To do this, you can simply think “wandering,” “mind wandering,” or “thinking.” These are very neutral ways of looking at your thoughts. This more objective way of noticing is not blaming or judging. It’s just commenting that the thought—whatever kind of thought you have—is a wandering one.

For those who are very visual, you might want to imagine thoughts as clouds floating by in the sky, or as a leaf floating on a stream or river. By letting the cloud or leaf float past, you can disengage and then return to your breath.

Get creative. You might find that just simply “noticing” a thought is enough to let you release it. Or you might use other words or phrases. One person who I worked with and had intrusive anxious thoughts, would simply notice those thoughts and mentally say, “Hello again, old friend.” In this way he recognized the thought but didn’t react to it, try to fight with it, or heap blame on himself for having an anxious thought. Basically, he changed his relationship to his thoughts! You can, too.

**As you do this practice, remember that thoughts are not necessarily facts. They do not define you.**

It’s also a good practice to **label emotions** as they arise. If you feel an emotion, such as anger, impatience, frustration, or boredom, simply name the emotion. Research shows that naming an emotion is helpful because it lets us process the emotion by examining it with the thinking brain as opposed to just reacting with the emotional part of the brain. Over time, this practice reduces stress related to negative triggers and puts you more in control of how you want to respond to any situation.

Are you ready to start the actual practice? Settle in to your chair or cushion, and start your Mindfulness Body/Breath/Mind Meditation for up to five minutes to start.

### **Reflections**

How busy was your mind during this practice? Remember, it’s okay to have thoughts, even lots of them.

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What was it like to observe thoughts in a more neutral and impartial way? What method(s) of labeling or disengaging from mind wandering worked best for you?

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What was easiest about this practice? What was most challenging?

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How could you create a daily Mindfulness Body/Breath/Mind Meditation practice? What would that look like? What challenges or obstacles would you face in implementing this? Remember that you do many things for your physical hygiene each day—brushing your teeth, taking a shower, etc.—so what would it be like to spend a few minutes a day for your mental hygiene?

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**Note:** When starting a Mindfulness Body/Breath/Mind Meditation practice, begin with a structured plan. Include when, where, and for how long you will practice. Consistency is important. So is accountability. So track your practice and let someone know. Another way to stay consistent is to practice with a partner or others. Remember that it's okay to start small and build up. You can always adapt the plan so it works better for you. Even a few minutes a day of this practice can be beneficial in helping find greater emotional peace and calm.

There are also apps that can help you to practice and develop a daily routine, so consider typing “mindfulness” into your app finder and several options will appear.



# Meditation for Resting in Self-Acceptance

## Instructions

We're going to use a visualization to find greater acceptance for something in your life—either internal or external—that is causing you pain because you want to resist its presence in your life. You are free to hold onto your pain, of course, but you can also feel free to try this practice and just notice what happens. The idea is to be more willing and accepting of your entire being and the challenging conditions you face.

This practice has two parts. First you'll identify what you don't want to accept right now—that thing that is causing you pain and hurt. Then, in Part 2, you'll use your imagination to see how you might change your perspective on that hurt or challenge.

You can always read through the entire meditation first, or read as you follow along, or record this so that you can easily complete this without referring to the guided script.

## **PART 1 — *What is one thing that I cannot accept?***

For this practice, think of one thing that you cannot accept. If you want, you can write this on a sheet of paper. What's important is that you identify something specific. It may be related to a physical body problem or worry, an emotion that you have, or a situation you are confronted with. Here are some examples:

- I am getting older, no longer feel attractive, and can't do what I used to do.
- I feel inadequate compared to others.
- I can't find a partner, and I fear being alone.
- I worry about my relationship with a friend, partner, child, co-worker, etc.
- I hate my job/career (fill in the blank) and feel like I'm at a dead-end.
- I was abused and mistreated by \_\_\_\_\_, and I can't forgive or accept it.
- I have a chronic health issue that I don't deserve and feel defeated by.

## **PART 2 — *Opening to greater understanding, compassion and self-acceptance***

Follow along with this meditation—eyes closed preferably, as you open to a less harsh perspective, or perhaps a fresh understanding of that thing you can't accept.

Find a quiet place to sit.

**Feel Your Benefactors** — Slow your breathing. Picture yourself resting in a place of supreme beauty and peace. This can either be a real place that you love—a place in nature—or an imaginary place that you can picture. Nothing here can harm or disturb you, and you feel protected, safe, and calm. If at any time your mind wanders away or has an unpleasant, intrusive thought, that's okay. Simply notice that with acceptance and then release that thought.

Next, think about people who have been benefactors in your life. You know someone is a benefactor because these people want you to be well and happy and safe. And, when you're around such persons you feel good. You may not agree with everything this person says or believes, but you know they wish the best for you! There's no limit to who they might be. They could be friends, family members, kindly neighbors, or even that spiritual person from history who you admire. Picture yourself surrounded by all these well-wishers, knowing that they would be here right now with you if they could.

Let yourself absorb the blessings and kind thoughts these benefactors have for your well-being. In fact, imagine that you are breathing in the wishes for your well-being. You might sense these as a warmth that spreads throughout the body and into your cells. Maybe you feel warmth in the heart center. As you feel these wishes for your safety and well-being, let the glow of caring and love circulate through the body.

**Visualize a Bubble of Self-Acceptance** — Next, imagine that the warm glow of blessings and love from your benefactors surrounds your being, almost like a protective bubble. See how the bubble's golden glow feels warm, comforting, and inviting. Think of this as your own bubble of self-acceptance. This is a bubble that can safely encompass anything, no matter how difficult or unwanted it may be.

Now, in the far-off distance, see the thing that you noted or wrote down earlier which you cannot accept. In fact, it's so far away that it seems small and insignificant—especially from your vantage point inside the safe bubble of self-acceptance.

**Grow the Bubble of Self-Acceptance** — Picture the bubble of self-acceptance growing larger and larger, expanding all around you. Even your thoughts, including your emotions—positive or negative—are now surrounded by the bubble, letting you just sit in an accepting and safe way with them all. Feel a sense of expansion, spaciousness, and peace as the bubble continues to grow.

As the bubble of self-acceptance grows, it naturally takes more and more inside of it. Once anything is inside the bubble you no longer have to react to it, but can freely notice it with kindness, greater understanding, and compassion.

The bubble is infinite in how far it can grow, and you are in control of the bubble as you let it expand farther and farther, until it finally gets all the way out to that difficult thing that you cannot accept. Let the bubble touch and make contact with the unwanted thing. Notice what this feels like. Then, let the bubble soften as it makes contact so that it can allow that difficult thing inside. The bubble naturally wants to bring everything inside because it is accepting in the same way that a loving parent, best friend, compassionate mentor, or spiritual teacher accepts you for who you are. There's nothing that the bubble can't accept.

**Rest with the All-Inclusive Bubble of Self-Acceptance** — As you come to peace and at rest with all that is inside the bubble—even that difficult thing—see the bubble growing even more. Watch as it expands far beyond the horizon of the beautiful place where you sit. Now, everything is within the bubble. There is no more inside or outside, no more pushing or pulling, no more good or bad you, no more winning or losing, in this all-inclusive, self-accepting and loving place.

Continue to breathe slowly for as long as you like. Know that your benefactors are still safely beside you, guiding you.

**Set a Wise Intention** — You now have it within your power to set an intention to accept and view your difficult situation not as an end point, but as a **starting point**. A point from which to grow and learn. Allow your own wisdom to take root and guide you with regards to moving forward.

Now it is time to bid farewell to your bubble of self-acceptance. To do this, send appreciation to your bubble and the kind benefactors and mentors who facilitated this experience and helped you feel safe. Know that you can return to this bubble and experience its warmth, safety, and self-acceptance anytime you need help with facing those unwanted and rejected things.

### **Reflections**

What was it like to feel yourself in a bubble of self-acceptance?

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How did this change your perspective of the unwanted thing in your life?

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What was hardest about this guided visualization practice? What was easiest?

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How and when could you use this practice in the future? What is one way this could help in a relationship in your life?

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# Loving-Kindness and Compassion Meditation

## Instructions

In this practice, you will learn some affirming thoughts for the well-being of yourself and others. But let's start by clarifying what the term loving-kindness really means. The kind of love referred to here is not the love bestowed upon specific persons, times, or situations, such as is the case with romantic, sentimental, and nostalgic love. Instead, loving-kindness is non-discriminatory and meant for all persons. It is your unconditional wish for all beings to experience health, safety, and goodwill. And, since loving-kindness naturally includes the idea of forgiveness, this practice will begin with a forgiveness statement. If you feel you are not ready to forgive yourself and always hold back on this, you may want give it a try and see how this feels. Also, it might help to explore Tool #35, *The Gift of Forgiveness*.

Finally, feel free to adapt the words to fit you better. Not only will this practice focus and stabilize your concentration, it will align you with an appreciation for the tenderness and preciousness of life.

## Loving-Kindness and Compassion Meditation (Affirmation)

### Forgiveness

Find a quiet place where you will not be interrupted. Sit in nature or looking out upon nature if possible. Start with forgiveness, saying the following words:

May I forgive myself for hurting others, either intentionally or unintentionally.

May others forgive me for hurting them, either intentionally or unintentionally.

May I forgive myself for hurting myself, either intentionally or unintentionally.

### Loving-Kindness Toward Oneself

Do this entire practice for about five minutes to start. Of course, if you want to do it longer than five minutes, go for it!

Repeat the following words until you feel a sense of lightness or well-being in the body. As you say these words, you can imagine or picture those who care about you—and who would express these same wishes for you. These persons may be family members, friends, even spiritual people you admire who would send you these wishes for your safety if they could be with you now.

May I be well.

May I be happy.

May I be safe.

May I be healthy.

May I be peaceful.

### **Loving-Kindness Toward Family/Friends/Mentors**

Now you will send out these wishes to those who have been benefactors in your life. These are persons who, when you are near them, make you feel safe and secure. You could even substitute the words “my family” or “my friends” instead of naming individuals. As you send out this blessing for the well-being of others, picture these persons looking happy and radiant.

May \_\_\_\_\_ be well.

May \_\_\_\_\_ be happy.

May \_\_\_\_\_ be safe.

May \_\_\_\_\_ be healthy.

May \_\_\_\_\_ be peaceful.

### **Loving-Kindness Toward Additional Groups**

Next you will send out blessings to the following groups:

- Neutral Persons — these are people whom you may see in your daily life but have no strong connection to.
- Unfriendly Persons — these are individuals who may be family members or associates, but who you don’t feel close to. And yet, even they would benefit from this blessing for their well-being.
- All Persons — you can extend your compassion blessing to all persons, and even imagine this blessing spreading outward, from your neighborhood to your county, to your state, to all states, to the continent, and to the entire world.

### **Closing Statement**

It can be helpful to conclude this practice with the following, which is part the ancient, traditional loving-kindness practice.

May suffering ones be suffering free.

May the fear struck fearless be.

May grieving ones shed all grief.

May all beings find relief.

### **Reflections**

What was it like to spend five minutes in this way? How did these words make you feel?

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If you could add in other words to the affirmation such as *may I be accepted, may I be understood, or may I be loved*, what might they be? Feel free to write down a new version of this practice using these new words.

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How could this practice help you to feel more open to life and others?

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You don't have to be in a seated meditation to use this practice. Where and when could you mentally say these words to help you get centered and more open?

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What is one way that this Loving-Kindness and Compassion Meditation practice could positively change a relationship in your life?

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## Sensing and Honoring the Body Practice

### Instructions

By sensing and honoring the body in this way, you can tune in to the vast array of subtle inner feelings, sensations, and emotions that this marvelous container holds.

Find a quiet place where you won't be interrupted. Feel free to do this out in nature. Ideally, do this practice while standing because it will give you more opportunity to move about. But it will work with sitting as well.

If it is helpful, put on some soothing music that your body can move to in a flowing way. In addition, consider using a scented candle, essential oils, or aromatherapy products that help your body relax.

**Take as long as necessary to go through these steps. But this can also be accomplished in just a minute or two.**

### Breathe through the Whole Body

Take a nice, soothing breath to calm the body and mind. As you inhale, raise your arms up over your head like the sun rising in the morning sky. Wiggle your fingers as they point up to the sky and hold the breath for just a few seconds. Then EXHALE SLOOOWLY as you gently lower your arms.

Take two more of these soothing breaths. With each inhalation, picture the air coming in and filling up the entire body—from the soles of your feet all the way up through the body and to the top of the head. With each exhalation, picture the breath carrying away any tightness or impurities down the body, out of the bottom of the feet, and back into the earth for recycling.

### Sensational Sensing

Right now, imagine you possess the senses of a superhero. Use all your senses to expand awareness of your surroundings. For example, it was found that people were able to follow the scent of chocolate on a grassy field using their noses. Humans can sense up to a trillion scents, and track scents just like dogs. What smells do you notice? What's the temperature of the air?

Move about your space as you expand your awareness 360 degrees. Notice as many little details of things as you can. Even if you know the space you're in, surprise yourself. You may even notice microenvironments as you move about. Let your feet feel every little crack or tilt of the ground. Listen for every little sound, hum, and squeak. Let yourself be amazed at the instrument of sensibility you possess!

### Tap the Body's Wisdom

Now, let's listen in to your body's needs. As you listen inwardly, notice if there's a wise voice of self-care or self-compassion telling you how to care for the body and take care of yourself. You can scan the body, starting from the bottom of the feet and moving up the body slowly, taking care to open up to any message that is there for you.

Where in the body is there tightness? Where in the body is there heaviness? Where is the body armored or guarded? If you notice something, allow yourself to sense it more deeply. If it had a color, what color would it be? How light or heavy? How long has this feeling been in the body?

As you listen in, let your body know that you are a friend who is coming to visit. There is nothing for either of you to be afraid of. If there is emotion, let yourself sit with it. Let it become softer and less hard, as you continue to just sit with it—being compassionate for how the body has stored emotions for you. But you can also help it to release emotion(s) when it and you are ready.

### **Move and Observe with Grace**

Spend a few moments now moving freely about the space. Now, imagine for a moment that you could watch your body from above, such as from atop a high hill. From this vantage point, observe how the body moves about with grace and dignity. In fact, imagine you can witness all that the body does for you on a daily basis. Watch how it moves around and follows your commands so that you can accomplish your goals each day. Notice how it connects with others. What movements and gestures does it make when with others? Is it welcoming? Standoffish?

Also, notice the signals your body sends you, such as its need for food or touch. How do you respond to these signals? What triggers does your body react negatively to? A lot of what we think is due to feelings may actually originate in the body.

Finally, observe how you take care of the body. How do you encourage it to sleep? How do you help it eat nutritiously? How do you guide it to connect with others?

### **Honor and Smile Inwardly**

Lastly, allow yourself to deeply honor and connect with the sacred inner self. This is how the body gives you a sense of well-being. Breathe into the body, your home. Move about or just be in silence with the sacredness of the body. When you openly listen to the body in this way, you let the body's wisdom communicate to you.

If you want, imagine smiling inwardly at the body, your intimate life partner, as you bathe it in the warm glow of appreciation and gratitude. Let this warm glow of thankfulness seep into all the cells of the body. Rest with this as long as necessary.

### **Reflections**

What was it like to spend a few minutes with the body in this way?

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Which of the honoring the body meditation elements was most helpful? What was one new thing that you learned or experienced?

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How could this practice help you to connect more with your body, care for your body, or create a close emotional connection with others?

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When and how would be good for you to bring this meditation into your day?

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**Note:** You don't have to spend a long time tapping into the body. A speed practice can be done in as quickly as a minute or two. The more frequently that you check in with your gut intuition, or the felt sense of the body, the more you will hear the body's wisdom communicating with you about what is right, good, or safe for you.

# Compassionately Standing Up

## Instructions

When you think about it, boundaries define almost everything in life. Most laws are about boundaries—letting people know what they can and can't do as a way of keeping the peace. But in our private lives there are no clear laws for setting personal boundaries. When others don't respect your boundaries—or you don't respect and heed theirs—that's when conflict occurs and relationships can fray.

Boundaries work best when they are clear and consistent. If others don't have a clear roadmap of your boundaries, or if your boundaries change day to day, there will be misunderstandings.

Everyone has the right to have his or her needs and boundaries respected. Bullying or disrespect can happen no matter how old you are, and no matter *who* you are. Even the Buddha was verbally mistreated, but stood his ground and refused to accept the abuse. Being a kind and compassionate person does not mean you can't stand up for yourself. In fact, that's exactly when it's important to stand up. The following reflections might shed some light on how to firmly stand up, yet still be understanding.

## Reflections

What does it physically look like when you stand up for yourself? What is your posture? What movements or gestures do you use? Is your posture defensive or aggressive? Or is it assured, strong, and assertive?

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Which of these postures would you *prefer* to use? Which ways of holding the body would best express the way you want to come across as you make your points?

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What emotions do you feel when you stand up for yourself? Fear? Worry? Anger? Impatience? Frustration? Doubt? What would it feel like if you could feel a sense of calm, confidence, and clarity in those moments of standing up?

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When you stand up, what does your face feel like and what does your voice sound like? Are your face and jaw tight or loose? Is your voice loud or soft, angry or composed, pressured or calm?

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What exactly are you standing up for? Why does this situation you are standing up for matter to you? What needs are you addressing (self-care, respect, honesty, etc.)?

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### **Follow-Up Action**

Mental rehearsal using visualization is a very effective means for learning new behaviors. Spend five minutes a day for the next week picturing yourself standing up the way you would like. It can help to integrate diaphragmatic breathing, found in Tool #20, *Self-Soothing and Synchronized Breathing*, into the visualization.

Picture yourself stating your needs as your body posture remains confident and assertive. Feel your face and hear your relaxed and expressive voice saying what needs to be said and clearly expressing why this matters to you (and the other person). Know too, that whatever happens, you don't have to react, but can choose to respond calmly.

Additionally, by practicing Tool #16, *Open the Compassionate Heart*, you can recognize and be understanding of the suffering of another—while at the same time compassionately standing up for your own well-being and needs.

Congratulations for exploring standing up for yourself—an important step that requires patience, persistence, and practice.

## A Story of Hope and Resilience

### Instructions

Here is an opportunity for you to tap into your history for a story that illustrates your own resilience in the face of defeat and failure. Resilience is about how you are able to recover and bounce back from loss or roadblocks that keep you from reaching your goals. In terms of a relationship, resilience means that you can tolerate disappointment, loss, or other ups and downs. Every relationship will ebb and flow, and resilience means that you have the strength to keep trying. It lets you maintain a sense of hope and optimism for the future.

Write your own story of resilience below. After, you can share that with another person, or partner, and have them share their story of resilience with you. When you share a story of resilience, you are also sharing hope and optimism.

### Describe a Challenge You Overcame

Right now, think of a time in your life when you were faced with obstacles that blocked you from reaching a goal—but **which you were able to overcome with the help of others**. Maybe you haven't thought about this kind of a story before, but if you look long and hard, you will find that you have overcome many challenges in your life. For example, did someone ever help you in the workplace, or in some other area of your life? Provide a basic, objective, step-by-step description of what happened:

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Now, let's examine this story from an emotional point of view. At your lowest point, when it seemed like you couldn't get through this situation or reach your goal—what emotions did you go through? However distressing these were, write them down here:

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Next, let's look at the positive emotions. What did you feel like when you got the help and/or resources you needed to overcome the roadblocks in your way? Did you feel happy, optimistic, and hopeful? Write down those happy emotions here:

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Reflect on a relationship situation that is distressing or difficult for you right now. How could your story of resilience give you hope or optimism?

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### **Follow-Up Action**

As an optional practice, share your story of resilience, using the previous steps, with another. Then, have that person go through the identical steps for sharing a story of resilience and hope with you. In addition, start noticing other stories from your life where you have been resilient and found others to support your goals and efforts.

### **Reflections**

How does sharing and hearing a story of hope with an important person in your life make you both feel? What is it like to know that you have a history of finding resources and having resilience? Together, discuss how this knowledge can be helpful for your relationship.

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# Diaphragmatic Breathing and Synchronized Breathing

## Instructions

Have you seen babies breathe? The belly moves out when they inhale, not the chest. Belly breathing, or diaphragmatic breathing, is how we all naturally breathe. This type of breathing relaxes us and helps us listen better—which is especially important when you're having a disagreement or argument with someone.

Below are five postures that will help you more easily breathe into the belly. This automatically turns on the body's relaxation system, which slows everything down. You'll feel more at ease, open, and less defensive when you breathe like this. As always don't force the breath. Just breathe naturally.

Follow along with each posture. As you do, notice which helps you more easily take that longer, fuller breath. There are two parts to this handout. In Part 2, you can try to synchronize your belly breathing with another person.

## **PART 1 — *Diaphragmatic Breathing***

### **Posture 1 — *Hands Behind the Back***

Standing or sitting, place your arms behind your back and clasp your hands together. When you do this, you stretch muscles that run through the rib cage—the intercostal muscles. All these postures stretch the intercostal muscles. This hinges the ribs open and makes it easier to take a deeper, fuller breath.

Notice if there's movement in the abdominal area. If you learned to 'suck it in,' give yourself permission to relax the abdominal muscles. You might even say the word "soft" as you breathe in—just letting the belly muscles relax and release a little bit.

### **Posture 2 — *Hands at the Sides***

Finding the lowest rib, position both hands at that lowest rib with your elbows facing out. As you breathe, you will notice the sides of the abdomen moving outward. Belly breathing expands the abdominal cavity in all directions. This posture can be good for anyone who doesn't want to focus on the belly moving outward.

### **Posture 3 — *Hands Behind the Neck/Head***

Clasp your hands behind your head or neck. If that's too difficult, you can alternately just raise your arms and touch your shoulders with your fingertips.

#### **Posture 4 — Bellows Breathing**

For this posture, place your palms together, chest high. Now you are going to use your arms like a bellows that opens as you inhale and closes as you exhale. As you open the bellows by moving the arms to your sides, take a nice, full belly breath. Keep your arms at your sides as you hold your breath for the count of two or three. Next, exhale slowly on the count of four as you bring the arms together and close the bellows.

#### **Posture 5 — Butterfly Breathing**

With your hands clasped under your chin, you will use your arms like butterfly wings, flapping them up as you inhale and down as you exhale. Take a long, slow breath as you raise your elbows (butterfly wings). Hold for the count of two or three. Then exhale slowly as you gently lower your butterfly wings.

### **PART 2 — Synchronized Breathing**

Synchronized breathing is a nice way for two persons to experience a state of calm together. This can be helpful anytime you and a partner have experienced stress—alone or together—as a way to regulate and attune with one another.

It will help if partners learn the diaphragmatic breathing using the different methods above. Also, remove any heavy clothing, like sweaters or jackets. Then follow these steps:

#### **Step 1 — Sit Back to Back and Feel Supported**

This works best sitting on cushions or on the floor where the partners' backs can touch. To begin, let yourself gently come into contact with your partner. Gently move back and forth and even side to side, without pushing too hard. This is not a pushing match, but a kind and gentle way of feeling how you are supported and in sync with your partner. Let yourself respond to the movements of your partner until you almost feel as if you are one, very much in touch and in tune.

#### **Step 2 — Sense and Synchronize the Breath**

Come to rest, with your backs gently touching, bring awareness to your breath and breathe diaphragmatically. As you do so, notice the subtle breathing of your partner. Notice how their breath goes in and out. Let yourself melt into that breath until you are matching your partner's breathing. Don't think too hard about this. If you have thoughts, see if you can just release them and let them go. Come back to your breath and synchronizing your breath with that of your partner. Allow yourself to flow in this way, moving breath-to-breath, effortlessly. Do this for up to five minutes.

#### **Step 3 — Sit and Face One Another**

Without speaking—turn toward each other. Continue to match your breathing while not touching. Allow your gaze to grow soft as you look at one another. Continue in this way for another three to five minutes. If you would like to touch hands during this phase, that is acceptable, but do so without words, and continue to breathe in a synchronized way.

#### **Step 4 — Honor and Thank Your Breathing Partner**

To conclude this exercise, place your hands at your heart center and say a mental thanks to your partner for being present with you during this practice.

### Reflections

What was it like to move and flow with another person in this way? What did you notice most? What was hardest or easiest about this?

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How did it feel to synchronize your breath with another? What feelings did you have when you felt yourself in sync with another?

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How could this practice be useful in the future? When could you use it with others?

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## Embracing Acceptance and Patience

### Instructions

Acceptance and patience often go hand-in-hand. It's hard to think about having one without the other. These are attitudes that anyone can adopt and put into action. While there may be things you don't like or can't control in your life, you *can* control how you want to feel about it.

When it comes to fostering supportive relationships, the twin qualities of acceptance and patience can go a long way toward smoothing out or avoiding potential conflicts with those you care about. For example, having acceptance and patience doesn't mean that you necessarily agree with a particular situation or behavior. But what it *does* mean is that you can *choose* to be at peace with it. This is surrendering the I-centric viewpoint to something softer, kinder, and more open.

Use the following reflections to explore how you might bring acceptance and patience into your relationships and life.

### Reflections

In the space below, write down an aspect of a relationship that you find difficult to accept and have patience for. This can be anything from a minor irritation to a major difference. What do you find most perplexing or challenging about this?

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Now, let's pretend for a moment that the situation was reversed. In other words, imagine switching places with the one you have difficulty with. Now that you are "standing in the other person's shoes," what does it feel like for you to be judged harshly or impatiently? Write down all the different emotions you might feel.

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Suppose you woke up in the morning and a miracle occurred so that you were fully accepting and patient with regards to the situation you identified above. How would you know this change really happened? What would be different in your speaking, actions, thinking, and feelings? How would this impact your relationship?

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What would it be like for you to make an executive decision to be more accepting and patient? Yes, you can decide to do that! Finally, how might this new attitude change your relationship? How might it benefit your health and well-being?

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Mental rehearsal is effective for helping athletes and others learn new behaviors. For 3–5 minutes, visualize yourself in the situation that provokes reactivity; only this time, picture yourself responding with dignity, grace, openness, and acceptance. As you visualize, relax your body, breathe slowly, and picture as many details as you can.

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Remember to be patient and accepting of yourself as you embrace these attitudes. Congratulations for moving in this new direction.

## Get C.U.R.I.O.U.S.

### Instructions

Do you remember the first time you saw a flower? A bird? A caterpillar? As a child, how wondrous and mysterious those simple things must have been! And yet as adults, it's easy to become oblivious to the many miraculous things that we pass by on a daily basis. It's as if a dark filter has drawn over our eyes and mind, blocking out the childlike curiosity that once filled us with joy.

What if you could remove the old filters and experience those who are in your life as if for the first time? Even that difficult person in your life (and we all have one or two) might be viewed very differently. This practice allows you to whole-heartedly participate and engage with others.

Use the steps in the acronym C.U.R.I.O.U.S.—individually, with a partner, or others—to transform ordinary awareness into one of curiosity. For Part 1, familiarize yourself with the acronym and then move on to Part 2.

### PART 1 — *Get C.U.R.I.O.U.S.*

#### C — *Clean the Slate*

Clean your mental chalkboard of old beliefs, biases, and opinions. Imagine that you are a traveler, and that this is the first time you are meeting the person before you (partner, co-worker, friend, etc.). Mentally, picture yourself literally sweeping away (with a broom or your hands) old mindsets and pre-existing beliefs.

#### U — *Uniqueness*

See the uniqueness of the one before you. When you look into someone's eyes you are looking at someone with 100 billion neurons in the brain—and more connections between neurons than there are stars in the known universe! Tap this opportunity to spend even a few minutes with this most unique human in the universe.

#### R — *Revel in Excitement*

Like a traveler journeying in a new country, let yourself feel the excitement of discovery that accompanies curiosity. Don't be afraid to let your excitement show as you get curious.

#### I — *Inquire with Interest*

Genuine inquiry means you focus your curiosity and interest on the other person. Try to learn or discover as many novel things about this "new" exotic place or person. Inquire not from a critical, but an open, curious perspective. Even if you think you "know" this person, see how many new things you can learn.

## O — *Opportunity to Learn*

Each interaction offers an opportunity to learn more, to get even more curious. Curiosity means you recognize that this moment is a precious gift that holds the potential for new memories.

## U — *Understanding Without Judging*

With curiosity, you are not criticizing or judging another, but are just trying to get beneath the surface and understand. Curiosity doesn't mean changing or fixing what you're curious about. But it does mean you can deepen your understanding of the unique person before you.

## S — *Share the Story*

What would you tell the people "back home" about the fascinating people and places you experienced on your travels? Just as there are different cultures with different traditions and ways of doing things, each person is like a mini-culture with his or her own history, tradition, and customs.

### **PART 2 — C.U.R.I.O.U.S. Practice Guidelines**

1. Use a journal, mobile device, or an index card to keep track of your C.U.R.I.O.U.S. journeying experiences with others. To develop this practice, try to do this each day for the next week. You could even seek out people with very different viewpoints than your own and explore each as a new, unique culture.
2. If there's a relationship that feels stuck, try the acronym to step back from your habitual perspective and see if you can experience and understand this person in a fresh way.
3. Partners can use this practice together to get curious about one another. For example, two partners can explore areas—based on differing beliefs or behaviors—that are causing conflict. Each partner will take a turn getting C.U.R.I.O.U.S. with the other. When done, each can answer the questions below and compare notes on what they learned.
4. At the end of the week, look over your C.U.R.I.O.U.S. notes and writings and answer the following questions:

### **Reflections**

Congratulations on this getting C.U.R.I.O.U.S. practice. What was it like to "clean your slate" of pre-conceived ideas and opinions before interacting with others? How did the thought of just getting curious shift your interactions?

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What was it like to look for something unique—even in someone you already know? What was the easiest thing about this? What was most challenging?

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What was your experience of “reveling in excitement”? How did this reconnect you with any childhood experiences of being curious? How did letting your excitement show affect the interaction?

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How different was it for you to “inquire with interest” rather than hold onto or promote your own point of view? How did this help you get more information?

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How did viewing this interaction as an “opportunity to learn” help you to have more patience and enjoy the moment?

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How did not taking a judgmental “right or wrong” stance help you to understand this other person better? What was it like to gain a new “understanding without judging” someone’s story or past or experiences?

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Every traveler has fascinating stories to tell. What was it like to “share the story” of your unique journey of being curious with another?

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# Grow Your Compassion Container

## Instructions

The word “compassion” actually means *to be with suffering*. Usually, we think that our own suffering comes from things that happen to us. For example, you lose a job, you fall and break your leg, or you get divorced. It’s easy to point at those situations as what cause pain. And yes, while those events are the initial cause of suffering, there is often a second and even more powerful kind of suffering that tags along for the ride. And that is *the story of how you hate what has happened to you*.

For example, yes, I broke my leg and am now in a cast—that is one kind of suffering. Now, the second suffering that is *optional and added on* is my reaction and rejection of the experience. That story might be, “I hate that I broke my leg because it shouldn’t have happened. I’m angry and upset that I can’t ride my bike now, and that I’m stuck indoors. And I don’t like how people look at me when I’m in a wheelchair or use crutches.” A deeper understanding of what is causing suffering can help you defuse it.

If you have had a disagreement or argument with a significant person in your life, spend a few minutes reflecting using Part 1, before sitting with that person in Part 2 of this practice. Ideally, both persons would use the handout here to grow their compassion containers.

## PART 1 — Reflections

What happened that is causing you to suffer right now? Write down the actual “event” that happened (the initial suffering). Then, write down the “story” you have about this and how it makes you react and feel (the second suffering).

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How much of your “story” involves your expectations about how things or another person “should be”? To what extent are your expectations or beliefs contributing to this story of added-on suffering?

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What would it be like to let go of the “story” for even a few minutes? Might there be another way of understanding why another person acted as they did? If you were in that other person’s shoes, why might you have acted in this way?

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## **PART 2 — *Sitting with Compassionate Presence***

Everyone has a “difficult” person in their life—someone who knows exactly which of your buttons to push. What would it be like, however, if you could set aside your assumptions about this difficult person? What if you could view them with a fresh perspective? That’s what a compassion practice like this one can help you to do.

Before starting this practice, read the following anecdotal story of a reporter who goes to Africa to interview a tribal leader.

*After a long and arduous trek through the African wilderness, a reporter finally arrives at the village where he has come to interview a well-known tribal leader. When the journalist meets with the translator, he is told about a unique custom. According to the custom, the reporter must first sit in silence with the tribal leader before asking any questions. The reporter agrees so he can get his story.*

*The reporter sits opposite the tribal leader, and they look directly at one another without speaking. The journalist finds this awkward for the first five minutes, but expects it to end soon. But after 20 minutes have gone by, the reporter’s mind frantically thinks, “When is this going to end?!” After 30 minutes go by, and then 50 minutes, the reporter finally gives up trying to guess, and finally lets go of fighting the experience. He breathes easily as he gazes into the tribal leader’s eyes. After over an hour has passed, the reporter has lost all track of time... even track of himself! For a time, the reporter has the feeling that looking at the tribal leader is like looking in a mirror. It’s as if a deep understanding, or communion, has taken place between himself and tribal leader.*

*Finally, the tribal leader nods at the journalist, as if to say, “we are finished.” The leader’s translator looks at the reporter and says, “You can now ask your questions.”*

*“Tell your leader ‘thank you’ but I have no questions. I’ve learned everything I need to know about him just by sitting here with him in silence!”*

For the next three minutes, you will sit in silence with another. As you sit, you will be sitting with a compassionate gaze and presence. What this means is that you will focus on the suffering that you and this other person share. All humans endure loss, sadness, grief, and aging. This is part of being human, and it is part of the richness of our shared human experience. No one can escape or avoid these conditions of life. In addition, this practice offers the opportunity to notice the uniqueness of the person before you. Each of us—with more neural connections than there are stars in the known universe(!)—is the most unique person in the entire universe.

As you begin, remember this:

**No one owns or purchases the future. All anyone can really count on is this thin sliver of time and space called *now*. Why not appreciate and honor the one who inhabits it with you?**

Even if you notice awkwardness, that’s okay. Just breathe and be present in a compassionate way with the one before you. Each partner will complete the following reflections and then share them.

### Reflections

What did it feel like to sit with another for three minutes in this way?

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What was most challenging about sitting in this way? What was easiest or satisfying about sitting with another in this way?

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What new understanding do you have about this person and their life? What is one deeper understanding this can give you in times of disagreement or conflict?

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## S.T.O.P. the Relationship Robot of Reactivity

### Instructions

Did you ever get sleepy behind the wheel of your car? When that happens, you lose control of the steering wheel and the car drifts dangerously. Similarly, whenever an old habit takes hold, it's like being asleep at the wheel. You are no longer really in control because the embedded habit—which runs a mindless, automatic program in your mind—takes over.

This practice gets your hands back on the steering wheel so you can turn in the direction you want. It can help you pause and reset when an old relationship pattern—or any toxic behavior—starts to put you in automatic mode. And because this practice is portable, you can use it almost anytime and anywhere.

Follow along with the acronym S.T.O.P. Each of the letters stands for the four steps that will give you the ability to slow down, calm yourself, recognize your emotions, and then get off autopilot and move in a positive direction. Anytime you feel yourself getting upset or triggered, separate and give yourself distance from a partner. Then, in a quiet space reset by using S.T.O.P.

### S — **Stop, Stand & Breathe**

This first step is important because it actually quiets down the reactive part of the brain that triggers the fight and flight response. Once the stress response kicks in, you stop listening and get defensive. Don't blame yourself—this happens to everyone. What you can do right now is **stand with your hands clasped behind your back and breathe deeply into the belly.** (Refer to Tool #20, *Self-Soothing and Synchronized Breathing*, for information on diaphragmatic breathing.) Take three to five belly breaths. This will turn on the body's relaxation response. It also helps bring your thinking brain back online!

### T — **Tune In to the Body**

Starting from the bottom of the feet, scan upwards into the legs, the torso, the internal organs, the chest and back, the hands and arms, all the way up to the head. **Notice where there is any tightness or tension in the body, and name whatever emotions you are feeling.**

Naming emotions quiets down the emotional part of the brain because instead of reacting to the emotion, you are changing your relationship to it—and using the thinking brain to observe and process it. *Try to name as many emotions as you can—even the deeper emotions.* For example, you might be angry, but beneath the anger you may feel hurt, sad, and disappointed. All of these can exist together. Knowing and naming the deeper emotions can give you greater understanding—and a more complete and articulate way of describing your feelings to your partner.

**Finally, imagine taking an in-breath and breathe into the tension, tightness, or emotion. As you exhale, imagine the breath carrying that tension or negative emotion down the body and out the bottom of the feet and back into the earth for recycling.**

## O — *Observe Pleasantness*

Now that you've calmed the body and worked with releasing your emotions, you will bring your awareness to your surroundings. **Here, notice one pleasant thing around you—a sound, a color, an object, or a shape.** This will soothe you by focusing on something pleasant, such as your favorite color, the chirping of a bird, or an object you like. Let yourself enjoy that soothing thing for a few moments.

## P — *Positive Preparation*

Now that you've paused and regulated yourself—both inwardly and with the external environment—you are no longer on autopilot or reactive. You are ready to prepare for the next helpful action. **What is the next positive or beneficial action you want to take on behalf of yourself and the relationship?** That could be anything from listening to soothing music to talking with a friend or counselor. You might think about what action could help to repair the relationship in this moment. You may also want to consider examining Tool #25, *Using Affirmations as a Relationship GPS*—using this as a guide to ensure that your next action aligns with your values.

You could also reflect on what happened—such as looking at how going on autopilot has affected you in the past and how you want to change that behavior. You may want to share your feelings with someone close and trusted. What's important is that you stay calm as you move forward. Consider exploring Tool #22, *Get C.U.R.I.O.U.S.*

### Reflections

What was it like to practice the S.T.O.P. practice? What was most difficult about it? What was easiest?

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How will you initiate this practice when you need it? How do you think you can best put this into practice?

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Like any skill, this one requires a lot of practice to perfect it—such as 15–30 minutes at a time, from three to five times a week for a couple of weeks. That way, when you need it, it will come naturally. What would a practice schedule look like for you? How can you create a plan and put it into effect? If you are doing this with another, you can practice together.

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## Using Affirmations as a Relationship GPS

### Instructions

Relationships often thrive or wither depending on the deeper values, or affirmations, that support them. You can think of affirmations as being like a GPS or navigation program in your car. Not only do they keep you from getting lost and off course, best of all they can help you safely find the way back “home.”

Affirmations are one way of being intentional that primes your brain and body. Affirmations get us ready and prepared to move and act. We need them to keep us focused on doing the things that matter to us—such as getting exercise or eating nutritiously—otherwise it’s easy to get sidetracked, distracted, affected by stress, and so on.

**For this practice, you will begin with a meta-affirmation—a deeper value that reflects a guiding principle for how you want to express and safeguard your relationship.** For example, the meta-affirmation of “*being a respectful partner*” would be expressed on a daily basis through numerous actions, such as speaking respectfully, being honest, and not interrupting, among others. Follow along with the practice below to get familiar with affirmations.

### Step 1 — Meta-Affirmations Are a Choice

**Meta-affirmations are most effective when stated positively, as something you actively choose to have in your life**—as opposed to thinking of what you don’t want in your life. For example, rather than saying “*I don’t want a relationship where there is dishonesty and mistrust,*” it’s better to state that idea in positive terms. That might look like: “*Each day, I choose to cultivate a relationship that is honest and trusting.*”

Remember to add the words “*I choose* or “*We choose*” to your relationship affirmation.

### Step 2 — Meta-Affirmations Are Not Specific Goals, but Guiding Principles

The meta-affirmation is a larger statement of what you want to manifest in your relationship. The goals will follow as specific actions that support this meta-affirmation. Let’s say your overall affirmation is: “*I (we) choose to have a relationship based on transparency and honesty.*” The actual actions that support this could be such things as checking in via phone or text or email during the day, as well as letting your partner have access to your phone and email. Those daily actions are the observable and measurable goals that can be written down after creating the meta-affirmation.

### Step 3 — Write a Meta-Affirmation for Your Relationship

You can have several meta-affirmations for your relationship. Look over the words below—these are just a few suggestions—or use your own words to create a single meta-affirmation, or value that you want as a guiding principle in your relationship.

*“Loving, Trusting, Respectful, Joyful, Physically Healthy, Honest,  
Forgiving, Loyal, Reliable, Generous, etc.”*

You can also combine several ideas together, such as: *"I (we) choose to create a mutually loving relationship that includes the values of loyalty, patience, generosity, openness, forgiveness, steadfastness, and forbearance."*

Every relationship is unique in knowing what matters to the partners or individuals involved. Take some time to craft a positively stated, affirmative choice in the space below:

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**Step 4 — Write Observable Actions that Support Your Meta-Affirmation**

To put the meta-affirmation into action, you need observable and sustainable behaviors that let you know it's working. What actions tell you that the deeper values are being supported? Write these below.

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**Reflections**

What was it like for you to create a meta-affirmation? What was the most challenging thing about it? What was the easiest? Creating affirmations is a process, and you will have the opportunity to go back and refine them.

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What was it like to come up with supporting behaviors and actions? How will you know if these need to be changed? Carry your meta-affirmation with you and look at it daily. Keeping it in mind is one way to keep your Relationship GPS working!

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## Enhance Relationships with a Positive Shared Memory

### Instructions

Just as focusing on something negative can “bring you down,” focusing on a positive event in your life can lift up your mood. Any relationship—at work or at home—can benefit from sharing and savoring positive memories together. Even if things are difficult in the moment, sharing good times from the past is like getting a positive booster vaccination. This might help you remember, for example, how you and another worked together to accomplish something or just have fun. So right now, get ready to recognize the positive times that you can appreciate together.

Go through the following steps one person at a time. This way each will get a chance to both share a story and respond to the partner’s story.

**Note:** If appropriate and it feels right, ask if you can hold the listener’s hand while sharing the story. Consider using Tool #28, *The Tenderness of Touch and Intimacy*, before this exercise as a way to experience physiological alignment and coherence.

### 1. Identify a Positive Story—An Experience Shared by Both Persons

Think about a positive memory from the past that you experienced with another, such as a partner, family member, friend, or other. This can be an experience that fostered a sense of togetherness, brought a sense of shared success or accomplishment, or was unique, meaningful, joyful, or memorable in some way. Write down the event and include the highlights of what stands out for you.

As you recall this positive memory, pay attention to how it feels in the body.

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## 2. Share the Story with a Partner (Who Listens with Empathy)

As you share this story, include as many details as you can—sights, sounds, smells, etc. Remember to point out not just *what* happened, but *the positive emotions of how it felt—such as exciting, exhilarating, joyful, adventurous, romantic, etc.* The emotional side of the story is important. The listener does not respond or interrupt at this time, but *just listens and re-experiences the story through hearing it.*

## 3. The Listener Responds and Shares Personal Recollections

After hearing the story, the listener will now share what it was like to hear this story by answering the following questions:

- What emotions did the listener feel when hearing this story?
- What are this listener's own recollections of the story?
- What did the listener like most about how the story was shared and told?

## 4. Partners Discuss What This Story Means for Them

Partners can write down and then discuss, or just discuss what a story like the one they just shared says about them. What relationship strengths does the story reveal? What relationship skills? What kind of trust?

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Are these strengths and activities part of the present-day relationship? If not, how can they be regained or incorporated?

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Lastly, after concluding this exercise, the above steps are repeated by reversing the roles. The listener is now the one telling a shared experience.

## Identifying Strengths to Build Closeness

How did you cope today? Everyone has to get through the day using many coping skills. Driving through rush hour traffic, for example, requires many skills: attention, awareness of surroundings, spatial and distance skills, and a good sense of direction. And by the way, having good reflexes sure helps! Then, there is a whole other set of coping skills you use in the workplace. Yes, all these can be thought of as coping skills—but in another sense, they represent your strengths. Strengths are personal qualities that help you to effectively problem-solve obstacles that you face each day.

For example, when you brush your teeth and take a shower each morning you are using strengths of self-care and discipline. When you call on someone at home or the office to help you out with something, you are using the strengths of relationships and locating resources. When you volunteer to help out someone at work you are engaging the strengths of generosity, hospitality, and compassion. If you can laugh at your own foibles and the stresses you face, you are using the strengths of humor and self-knowing awareness. Even finding your car in that giant mall parking lot is the strength of memory!

One organization has assembled over 100 character strengths. You can take a free 15-minute assessment and identify your top 24 core strengths at [viacharacter.org](http://viacharacter.org). Looking at a list of strengths before doing this exercise is not necessary, but it may give you more ideas about the many kinds of strengths you already possess.

### Instructions

*Read this introduction for how to listen and how to tell the story before beginning.*

For this practice one person is going to share a simple story with his or her partner—such as going to the store, what happened at work during the day, or taking care of some other apparently ordinary daily chore or business.

### 1. The Story Teller Includes the Six Following Details in the Story

- **History**
  - This means digging deeper into one's previous experience and feelings about doing a particular job, task, or activity. For example, if you had to get on the freeway or deal with rush hour traffic as part of your story, what is your "history" around that? How do you manage to cope with it? Do you try to avoid the traffic, find a new route, or wait until it dies down?
  - Maybe you have a history around dealing with a particular person, task, or going into a particular store. Make sure you include this.
- **Stressors**
  - Some stressors are related to getting enough sleep and enough to eat, which affects the ability to function. Other stressors include time constraints, family, and other obligations. And again, how did you manage to cope with these stressors?

- **Moods and Thoughts**

- No one stands in the same river of moods and thoughts for very long. When you woke up in the morning, did you have a mental “to-do” list and anxious thoughts running in your head? How did you work around these mental and emotional obstacles?

- **The Body**

- The body has a story and an influence of its own. For example, were you able to take care of the body—such as finding time for stretching, walking, or exercising? Did the body have issues that affected you adversely? How did you cope in spite of these issues?

- **Habits**

- What habits did you engage in that either helped or hindered your ability to attain your goal? Some habits, like getting out of bed the moment you hear the alarm, might have helped you. Others, like not paying attention to the time, might have produced a different result.

- **Centering Rituals**

- What things did you do that helped you get through the day and made things a little easier for you? Did the clothing you picked out have a comforting texture or cheerful color that soothed you? Did you purposely choose to put on certain music during your transition in the car? Maybe a hot cup of coffee helped you feel more comforted, centered, and focused for the day ahead? Think of all the ways you helped yourself center so you could attain your goals.

## **2. The Listener Reflects Back the Identified Strengths**

The listener has a very special job. You are listening, but not in the usual way. The listener’s role is to identify the strengths that are in the story. Do not interrupt, but listen with interest and empathy through the entire story. When the story is over, you will share, or reflect back as many strengths as you found in the story. If it helps you to write these on a notepad as you’re listening that’s okay.

## **3. The Story Teller Expresses What It Was Like to Hear His or Her Own Strengths**

The real secret here is to let the strengths in. If it helps, pretend you are listening about the strengths of someone else. Appreciate the strengths that you possess. After you hear your strengths, tell your partner what it was like for you to hear these. Was it surprising? Affirming? Satisfying?

Afterwards, the roles are reversed and the Story Teller takes the role of the Listener, and vice versa.

### **Reflections**

Now you and your partner have had the chance to share a story and listen for strengths, let’s explore this a little further. What was it like to *listen* for strengths? How different was this than your normal way of listening? What was the easiest thing about it? What was most challenging?

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What was it like to hear your strengths reflected back to you? How did it feel to know that someone understood and appreciated your strengths? How are your strengths and those of your partner similar? How are they complementary?

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### **A Weekly Strengths Practice**

As a practice, notice one of your partner's strengths each day and then share that with your partner.

Another practice is to put one of your own strengths into action once a day for a week in a way that supports your partner. Each person can write down these experiences and at the end of a week, compare notes on sharing your strengths with one another.

## Attuning with Touch and Intimacy

Touch and movement are the most fundamental ways that we connect and build trust with others. The first thing we experience as babies is being held closely. Think for a moment about a kind hug or pat on the shoulder that made you feel good. Used in the right way, touch builds intimacy and safety, as well as gives us a sense of reciprocity. The following practice will let you explore touch as you establish closeness with another.

### **PART 1 — *Mirroring***

#### **Instructions**

Stand opposite each other at a comfortable distance. Have one person go first and make slow movements as the second person mirrors, or mimics, these movements. This movement might be swaying to-and-fro, walking, moving the arms and hands, or even making facial expressions. The idea is to mirror whatever movements the partner makes.

After doing this for about three minutes, stop and reverse roles.

Now the second person will lead the movement as the other person follows, or mirrors, the movements for another three minutes. When done, both persons will reflect on the following:

#### **Reflections**

What did it feel like to follow along and “mirror” your partner? What did it feel like for the person who was initiating or leading the movement?

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How well synchronized were you both? Does this remind you of any other time when you have felt in sync with one another?

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How could mirroring help you get more connected with one another during the typical day?

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## **PART 2 — Co-Balancing**

### **Instructions**

Stand opposite the other person at a comfortable distance. Both persons will raise their arms until palms are facing outward at chest height. Slowly, the partners will move their palms closer until they notice even the most subtle sensation of heat, warmth, energy, or pressure. Stop and just notice what this is like.

Then, slowly continue to move the palms and hands closer until just the fingertips of your hands touch the fingertips of your partner's hands. This is a very light, gentle touch. Notice if you can feel the other person's pulse, which can sometimes be felt as a tingling in the fingertips.

Next, very slowly bring the hands closer until the palms gently touch. As you do this, however, notice which parts of the hands come into contact *before* the palms touch. How do the fingers straighten out? How does the positioning of the wrists change ever so slightly?

Now that the hands are touching, notice the feeling between your palms and the palms of your partner. Is more heat building up? Stand this way for up to a minute, just sensing.

Next, reach out with both arms and hands, and hold your partner firmly above the wrist. You are now connected and supporting one another. As you do this, plant your feet solidly and begin to sway gently back and forth, like a seesaw. As one moves back, the other person acts as a counterbalance, supporting the other. This takes some practice, and you may find that bending your knees gives you more leverage. Don't pull hard; this is not a contest or competition, but a supportive and cooperative stance. The idea is to make your partner feel safe and protected, even as they might lean back slightly. You don't have to lean back very far; even a few inches is enough as long as your partner counterbalances and helps you feel safe and secure.

Do this for about three minutes. Then, gently release each other's arms.

### **Reflections**

What did it feel like to gently touch your partner's palms? Did you feel energy between the palms even before they touched?

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How did sensing each other's palms enhance a sense of closeness or safety?

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What did it feel like to be supported, or held, by your partner while see-sawing or moving back and forth? What would it be like for you to have this feeling of support in other areas of your life?

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What would it be like to use this co-balancing practice after a disagreement? How could you use this practice to just feel reconnected?

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## Rituals for Coming and Going

If you have ever shaken someone's hand, said goodnight to your partner, used the words "excuse me," when bumping into someone, or recited grace before a meal, you have used a ritual.

There are so many rituals in everyday life that we often don't even think about them. Rituals ease our communications with others. More than that, they bring a sense of normality into the day. They give us the sense that all is right with the world. In our relationships, rituals take on yet another important role. They help us to feel safe, connected, and included. How you enter and leave a space—and how you respond during those times with your partner or friends—can either strengthen or weaken relationships. Use the reflections below to create rituals that promote positive feelings and closeness.

You can use the following reflections for any kind of relationship. Ideally, partners will fill out these reflections on their own and then compare notes.

### **PART 1 — *Rituals for Leaving—Encouraging Feelings of Closure and Connection***

#### **Reflections**

**When you physically leave** your home (or other space), what behaviors or actions or words do you use with others? For example, do you say "goodbye," shake hands, give a hug or a kiss?

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Do you have a sense of closure with your leaving or goodbye ritual? How does it feel for you?

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Does your goodbye ritual include a message of how you will stay connected later? What would a connection ritual look or sound like?

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**When you stay home** and your partner or other family members leave, how do you provide a sense of connection for them?

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If there was one little thing your partner could do for you in the morning when you are leaving the house that would give you a sense of secure and safe transition, what would that be? (Such as getting out of bed and giving you a kiss, wishing you a good day, etc.)

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If there was one little thing your partner could do for you in the evening before going to bed (sleep is another kind of “leaving”) what would that look or sound like?

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## **PART 2 — *Rituals for Entering—Encouraging Feelings of Safety and Inclusion***

### **Reflections**

**When you physically enter** your home (or other space), what behaviors or actions or words do you use with others? For example, do you say “hello,” shake hands, give a hug or a kiss? If you skip this ritual step, what do you do? If you bring your stresses of the workday home with you, how does that affect your ability to smoothly reconnect with others in a safe way?

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How well does your entering ritual offer you and others a sense of safety and inclusion? How does it feel?

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Does your entering ritual include physical contact and eye contact? If not, what might an entering ritual look or sound like?

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**When you return home,** how are you greeted and welcomed by your partner (or others)? How does this make you feel safe and included?

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If there was one little thing your partner could do for you when you return home that would help you feel safe and included, what would that be? (Such as turning off the computer or TV, and coming up to give you hug and a kiss.)

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How does it feel in other areas of your life (workplace, friends, etc.) when you “enter”? If you are not getting a warm, safe, included welcome, how can you change that? Could you find one person who could provide that for you?

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### **Conclusions**

Congratulations on exploring these small, but important ways of connecting and building relationships when coming or going. Like any skill, implementing these rituals requires patience and practice. Keep using them and see how they work.

## Imagine Your Joyful Next Chapter

Here is a simple, three-step visualization practice for focusing on how you might move forward in your life. If you find that you focus on the past, or on trauma that has happened to you, this can be a nice way to rewire your brain and provide hope for the future. If you find yourself asking, “Where will my relationship be three or five years from now?” you can either do this alone or try this practice with another.

However you use this, this practice offers the opportunity to get out of limited ways of how you picture your future. Instead, it lets you use joy as the compass that points the direction forward.

### Instructions

Find a quiet place where you can journal or close your eyes to visualize. Use whichever method works best for you.

You will be visualizing or writing for 5–10 minutes, or as long as needed. Follow these three steps.

### Step 1 — *Locate and Connect with Joy*

Think of a time you felt joyful or were passionate about something.

Visualize how you looked and felt at that joyful time. Feel the hope and optimism that you felt. What does this feel like in your body? Right now, feel the joy you felt before.

If negative thoughts creep in, notice these with a sense of acceptance but without identifying with them. Then, let yourself return to experiencing the essence of joy.

If you don’t remember what it was like to be joyful, simply imagine that you are joyful by picturing yourself doing something you enjoy and love to do.

### Step 2 — *Stay with Joy as You Imagine Your Future*

Maintaining that feeling of joy, imagine what your joyful future self might look like in 1, 5, or 10 years. Choose whatever time frame you want. Even six months will work if that’s what you choose.

Remember to let go of expectations about which direction your joy might lead you. Rather than thinking “this is how it must be,” imagine this is how joy could move your life in an unexpected or new direction. Freely let the present experience of joy carry you on a journey toward future joy. Let joy be the driver of this ride!

In addition to choosing how far in the future you want to imagine, you can also choose the area of your life you would like to focus on. You can choose to visualize, for example, how joy could lead you toward a personal or relationship goal or dream related to career, retirement, or getting a home, etc.



### **Step 3 — Visualize and Journal**

For 10 minutes, visualize or write the story of how joy helps you move toward your future.

As you do this, pay attention to the character strengths that your joyful self possesses. What strengths might help you on your journey to your future? If these are not strengths you currently have, notice which strengths you might want to develop that would help you reach your next joyful future chapter.

Each week, re-visualize how joy moves you toward being your next joyful future chapter. Fill in missing steps that help you reach your best potential future.

Remember, your future self is an expression of the joy you feel *now*. Don't get too attached or worried about a future outcome.

### **Reflections**

How did finding your joy help you to think differently about a future that you create?

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How did this practice help you connect with or think about your strengths?

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How did thinking about your future make you think about the things that can assist you both now and in the future?

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If you did this with another, what did you learn from sharing your experiences? How can this help you both as you move into a shared joyful future chapter?

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## Be an Inclusive Benefactor

Was there ever someone in your life who helped you out, even in a small way that made you feel good? Or made you feel understood? Whether it was a kind teacher, a friendly neighbor, a family member or friend, that person was a benefactor for you. Typically, it feels good to be near one of these benefactors because they have your best interests at heart. You may not agree with everything they say, but you know they care and are watching out for you in their own way.

For this practice, you will visualize how you've acted as a benefactor in your life. It's important to remember that each of us has an impact in the world. Sometimes, even a small act of generosity and sharing can change the direction of someone's life. Keep in mind that this is not meant as an ego-boosting practice. It is a way of accurately recognizing, honoring, and appreciating how you participate in life and have contributed to the world around you.

### Instructions

Find a quiet place where you can sit without interruption. Depending on which you like best, you can either visualize or write down your experience as a benefactor.

For the next 5–10 minutes, write about a recent experience in which you acted as a benefactor for another. This might have been at work or in your relationship. When doing this practice with another, each individual can focus on something that allowed the other person to feel grateful or flourish in some way.

To get the most benefit of this practice, write down or visualize your experience using all your senses as you recall it. Include all the details you can.

As you do this, remember to check in with your body to see how recalling your experience as a benefactor makes you feel.

### Reflections

How did it feel in the body as you recalled your experience of helping your partner, or another, to flourish? What new insights did you gain from this experience?

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What would it be like to expand your benefactor practice into other areas—such as at work, home, and in the community?

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What strengths did you tap into as you recalled being a benefactor? How else might these strengths be used to offer help to an even larger and more inclusive group of persons or community?

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If you did this benefactor experience with another, what did you learn from sharing your experiences? How might you work together as benefactors? What would that look and feel like?

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# Servant Leadership

What do you feel about the word “leadership”? Does it make you cringe because you have seen the abuses of leaders—in families, politics, religion, relationships, and so on? Mindfulness training instills and encourages a different kind of leadership—one more based on humility and cooperation. This leadership recognizes that true happiness comes from being of service and enhancing the well-being of others.

## Instructions

This exercise is a reflection, where you reflect inwardly to explore your views on exercising leadership in your relationship. You don’t have to get all of the answers today. After all, empowering co-leadership is a process that you and your partner, or others you work with, will continue to grow and refine.

Partners will separately complete these reflections and then share notes afterwards.

## Reflections

In your family history, what did leadership or power look like? Was it used in a fair or unfair way, and how has this shaped your own relationship to leadership?

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Do you actively seek or avoid a leadership role in different areas of your life? What do you either worry most about, or enjoy most about having a leadership role in your relationship or other life area?

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There is a kind of leadership called “servant leadership” that is based on empowering others to reach their best potential for the benefit of the relationship or work group. This type of leadership recognizes humility, as well as standing back and letting others do their job. If you adopted this style of leadership, how would that change your relationship with your partner (or others)?

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Can you think of a specific example of how you would benefit from having your partner stand back and let you take on certain responsibilities? What would be the most difficult thing about this? What would be the easiest thing?

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On the flip side, can you think of a specific example of how you might benefit from standing back so your partner could take on certain jobs or roles? What would be the most difficult thing about this? What would be the easiest thing?

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On a separate piece of paper, draw a visual map of what leadership looks like in your relationship. You can draw this any way you like to depict what power or leadership in the relationship feels like for you. How are things unilateral or cooperative? What would make the map fit more into the servant leadership model of empowerment and collaboration?

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Physically, how does your body move when it uses power or leadership in a non-servant leadership way? Stand and move to see how that feels.

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Now, see how your body responds through posture and movement when you assume a more humble, giving, empowering way of working with another.

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### Follow-Up

Share your findings with your partner (or others) as you go through your reflections. You can re-create and compare your body movement and postures as well.

Afterwards, explore how to create empowering and collaborative leadership in your relationship. Look over the five steps of empowerment below, as found in leadership expert John Baldoni's *Great Motivation Secrets of Great Leaders*.<sup>33</sup> Although originally described for business leaders, I have added in a dash of mindfulness and adapted these suggestions for empowering all relationships.

1. *Identify Opportunities* — Leaders find ways of helping others cooperate and collaborate. This is viewing the relationship as a team—we as opposed to I. Make sure you and your partner both feel the responsibility is doable.
2. *Give Responsibility* — What's important is that both persons are in on the decision. Empowering opportunities are neither unilaterally assigned nor taken on without a cooperative discussion and decision. Anyone has the power to say no, but try to encourage participation, making sure to explain why this is helpful for the partnership.
3. *Distribute Authority* — Whoever has the responsibility to do the job must also have the authority to make it happen. For example, if that means making arrangements for a vacation trip or purchasing a large item, then that person must be trusted to make the final decision. This doesn't mean the other partner can't be available for consultation if needed, but this isn't imposed or expected.
4. *Hold Your Partner Accountable* — If things don't go as expected, a mindful approach applies acceptance and compassion. But at the same time, this is something both partners can learn from. Taking responsibility for the good *and* the bad is part of personal growth, and the growth of the relationship.
5. *Empower Unto Others* — Once empowerment takes hold it tends to spread. For example, how can others in your family take on additional responsibilities and the authority to make decisions? Empowering is liberating because it creates a synergy and team atmosphere that is both energizing and joyful.

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<sup>33</sup> John Baldoni, *Great Motivation Secrets of Great Leaders* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), pp. 107–109.

## One-Minute Technology and Workplace Vacation

It only takes a few moments to rejuvenate yourself with a mental vacation. Research shows that mental rehearsal—long used in sports and the military—works because when you vividly picture yourself doing something the brain responds as if you are actually experiencing that event.

So enjoy the one-minute vacation you are about to take. Best of all, these are portable vacations, so you can take them with you wherever you happen to be. Take a mental vacation anytime you feel worn out, uncreative, stressed, or uninspired. These will be helpful because they will also give you a break from technology overload.

### Instructions

Find a quiet spot where you can sit undisturbed for a minute or two. You can do this visualization for longer, but 1–2 minutes is effective.

Before starting, spend a few seconds pressing your heels into the floor or press your hands together if you are lying down. This is just to help you get grounded. Next take two or three long, relaxing breaths, exhaling slowly to get more relaxed and release tension.

Now, follow along with the visualization:

- Recall a vacation place where you felt at ease, relaxed, and rejuvenated.
- Close your eyes and vividly picture the place where you took your vacation. See it in as much detail as possible, using all your senses. If it was at the beach, for example, let yourself smell the ocean breeze, hear the ocean surf tumbling onto the shoreline, feel the warmth of the sun on your body and the sand on your feet, and smell the scent of the fresh air or tanning lotion. Feel your body sink deeply into the towel or sand.
- If you are participating in an activity during your visualization, such as swimming, surfing, hiking, skiing, etc., visualize your movements and surroundings.
- Continue your visualization for one to two minutes.
- Notice any changes in your body—breathing, movement, energy, and respiration—that correspond with your visualization. Even as you open your eyes, let yourself continue to bask in the good feelings and rejuvenation that this mental vacation brings. Carry it with you, feeling refreshed as you continue with your day.

### Reflections

How did your one-minute vacation feel? Did you notice changes in the body?

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Since this practice works best with repetition, how could you best schedule practicing this skill?

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What signals—such as headaches, tension, muscle tightness, or other feelings—let you know that it's time to take a one-minute workplace vacation? Consider using the practice before stress gets too intense or extreme.

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## Spread One Kindness Today

Think for a moment about a kindness that you received in this past week. How did even the smallest kindness—a smile, a word of encouragement, or a helping hand—make you feel? If it made you happy, appreciative, or affirmed, here's your chance to pay kindness forward. Kindness is also an opportunity to get creative in your life. That's because the opportunity to offer kindness comes when you least expect it. How you offer it is unique to you.

Consider, too, that kindness is a builder of hope and happiness. Doing one kind thing lets you participate in the world in a positive and meaningful way. Best of all, it invites more heartfelt smiles into your life.

As you express kindness, know that you are lending hope and happiness to others, one little building block at a time.

### Instructions

To prime and ready yourself for kindness, reflect on the following:

Think of a recent kindness *someone did for you*. How did it feel? How did it make you feel about this kind, giving person?

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Think of a recent kindness you gave to another. What did this feel like? How do you think it made the other person feel?

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There is no small act of kindness. But if you are up for a challenge, consider doing one of the following—at work or home:

- Compliment someone you have a problem with.
- Anonymously buy a cup of coffee for the person waiting in line behind you.
- When you're in a hurry, step aside and let someone get in front of you in line.
- Talk kindly to someone you might otherwise ignore.
- Compromise with, or forgive, someone who you disagree with.

For the next week, continue to consciously do one kind thing each day. Remember to keep a log of these kindnesses.

**Follow-Up After a Week**

After looking over a week's worth of kindnesses what do you notice? What was surprising or unexpected by doing one kind thing a day?

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What was the most challenging aspect of this practice? What was the easiest?

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What is one way that a kindness made a difference to someone close to you?

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How did this practice make you feel or change your perspective on things? How could it benefit your relationships?

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How could you bring a kindness practice into your life on a consistent basis? What might that look like?

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## The Gift of Forgiveness Meditation

If you're reading this, you may have had a relationship issue that caused anger or resentment that is difficult to accept, let alone forgive. The truth is, forgiving can be hard. For those who have been abused or mistreated, it might seem that forgiving is a mistake or a weakness. And then there's the fact that sometimes, holding onto hurts and anger can feel good. It can give someone a sense of control and righteousness. And, it might feel that anger is necessary to prevent further abuse and injustice. Those are all valid points.

Ultimately, if you've been hurt, no one but you can decide whether or not to forgive. And that is exactly what makes forgiveness an extraordinary gift—one given to someone who may not really deserve it. You don't have to do anything different after making this choice, and the one you forgive may not even know—and that's okay.

But in the long term, you have to ask if continuing to feed the flames of anger is helping or hindering your life. If you do decide to forgive, you might do it for the selfish reason that it helps you and gives you hope. It doesn't mean you will forget or let abuse happen again. That's important to know.

With that said, this handout is a meditation and exploration into forgiveness.

### Instructions

Find a comfortable and safe place to sit where you won't be interrupted. Close your eyes and take two or three nice comforting breaths.

Remind yourself that you are in a safe place. If at any time during this practice you feel distressed, you can open your eyes and decide to do this practice later.

You will imagine two scenarios. **In the first scenario, you will imagine yourself 10 years in the future still harboring anger and resentment** toward whomever or whatever caused you hurt. **In the second scenario, you will imagine your future self after having forgiven.**

Note: This can be done as a complete mental visualization, or by changing between two chairs—one representing the present self, and the other representing the future self. When seated in the "future self-chair," you can verbally respond to the questions being asked.

### Scenario 1 — *Future Self Holding onto Anger, Resentment, Hurt*

Mentally picture the image of yourself 10 years into the future sitting opposite you.

Spend a few moments now to introduce yourself to this future self. Let it know that you have come to explore how the choice not to forgive has worked for you through the years. Let this self know that you feel a strong sense of respect, connection, and compassion for it. You simply want to get more information.

PAUSE after each question to get the answer—either mentally picturing it or by switching to the other chair.

### Question and Answer

Q: I'm really curious to know what it has been like for you to hold onto this anger for 10 more years. How has that affected you personally—I mean physically and emotionally or otherwise?

Q: Now that you decided to hold onto that anger, how has that affected your attitude about people and your life in general?

Q: What happened to that relationship that caused you pain since you held onto anger? Even if the relationship ended, or even if that person has passed away, how has holding onto the anger helped you?

Q: Since you've been living like this for 10 years, do you ever think there would be a time that you'd be willing to let go of this anger and forgive, even a little bit? And if you did this how do you think it might affect your next 10 years?

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to share with me? Thank you for spending this time with me. I may want to consult with you in the future if that's okay.

### Scenario 2 — *Future Self Letting Go of Anger, Resentment, Hurt*

Q: Thank you for spending this time with me. I'm really curious to know what it has been like for you to have forgiven and let go of anger for these 10 years. How has that affected you personally—I mean physically and emotionally?

Q: When you decided to let go of anger and resentment, what was the hardest thing about doing that? What made you finally decide to take that step to offer that gift?

Q: How did this change affect your ability to experience joy? Did it affect your attitude about people and your life in general? Do you still feel safe? Did you forget? I know that's a lot of questions!

Q: What happened to the relationship that caused you pain since you let go of anger? Even if the relationship ended, or even if that person has passed away, how has letting go of the anger helped you?

Q: Since you've been living like this for 10 years, what's the biggest difference you've noticed in your life? And if I were to start thinking about letting go of my anger, what advice do you have for me?

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to share with me? Thank you for spending this time with me. I may want to consult with you in the future if that's okay.

### Reflections

Sit for a few moments longer to reflect on your experiences in exploring forgiveness with your future self. What new thoughts or insights do you have?

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## Building Trust that Lasts

No relationship instantly begins with a deep well of trust. Long-lived trust builds mutually and slowly, little by little through shared cooperation, respect, and taking an interest in what another has to offer. Trust builds bridges of safety to others. The following practice helps build and maintain those bridges.

### Instructions

The next time you are with someone, try building trust through the steps on the following checklist. You can even think about a recent relationship interaction and review it on the basis of this trust-building checklist.

- **Listen to Your Gut**
  - Are there any red flags or doubts you feel or sense?
  - If there are any signals making you unsure if you are safe, slow down. You can always get those doubts or questions answered at a later time.
  - Remember that **trust takes time**. So don't rush it.
- **Mutual Attentiveness and Listening**
  - Because mutuality builds trust, you can do your part by making sure the interaction is not one-sided. That means allowing the other to share as you listen with undivided attention.
  - Let go of your own agenda—at least for the moment.
  - See if you can be free of judgment and personal bias.
- **Take an Open Body Posture**
  - A non-defensive body posture and open gestures—such as not crossing the arms over the chest—are important for trust building. Make appropriate eye contact.
- **Be Curious**
  - Let yourself get curious, like a detective who wants to know more. Letting someone be at ease is a good way to understand that person. Through understanding another, you can know if you feel safe.
  - Take an active interest in the ideas, hobbies, and life of the one you are with. Whether you've known this person for a short or long time, continuing to take an interest lets them know you care.
- **Be Honest While Empathizing**
  - As the old saying goes, "put yourself in the other person's shoes." You might not agree, and you can share your perspective while being respectful. At least you can try to see what things look like from their perspective. Remember, too, that honesty also means following through on your word and being dependable. Without honoring your word, trust cannot grow.

- **Accept the Imperfections**

- Who's perfect? If you really want to build trust, try accepting those things you *don't* like about someone. This doesn't mean accepting things that are unkind, harmful, or abusive. But it means that you know that person is a human with frailties. When you can accept another's frailties, they can accept yours. This is an important test and building block of trust.

### **Reflections**

Which of the above trust-building items, if any, was new to you? How have you used these items in the past to build trust?

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Which of these practices is the easiest? Which do you find most challenging?

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Because trust building is mutual, how do close persons in your life use these practices? How does that affect your relationships and make you feel?

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What is one positive change that might come from using the practices above?

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## Softening with G.L.A.D.

There are a lot of things in life that can harden our view, making us more rigid in our views, as well as more fearful, guarded, skeptical, and cynical. In fact, this is what happens when you encounter stress over and over. It becomes easier to erect a protective wall. The problem is that wall keeps out the good things, too!

Here is a practice that can soften your view by letting you notice the good, decent, and beautiful things that life has to offer. Yes, life has those things that may be causing you stress, but it also has the good things.

**Attention is selective, and where you focus your attention determines your memories and experience.** This simple four-part acronym can help keep things in balance and give you a fresh perspective.

### Instructions

Each day, individuals, partners, friends, families, or other groups that are using this practice can share their experiences at some point, such as at the end of the day or at dinnertime. Throughout the day, take a mental snapshot or write down each of the following items.

**If you want to focus on relationship gratitude, do the practices in boldface.**

### G — *One Gratitude*

- Find one thing you were grateful for or appreciated this week.
- **One thing about your partner (friend, etc.) that you're grateful for.**

### L — *One Learning*

- Something new you learned today.
- **One new thing you learned about your partner (friend, etc.) today.**

### A — *One Accomplishment*

- One act of self-care, such as getting enough sleep and nourishment.
- **One accomplishment made by your partner (friend, etc.) today.**

### D — *One Delight*

- Anything that makes you feel joyful or happy, such as hearing a bird chirp, seeing a flower, laughing at a joke, tasting food, returning a smile, noticing a pleasant sensation, etc.
- **One delightful experience related to your relationship.**

### Reflections

What was it like to notice the four elements of the G.L.A.D. practice? Which of these was the easiest for you? Which was the most challenging?

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If you did this alone, what did you notice? How did this change how you experienced the day? Did this practice soften you in some way?

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If you did this practice with another, what was it like to share your experiences? What was it like when you heard the other person's experiences?

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The G.L.A.D. method is like any skill that needs practice and repetition. How could this practice be integrated into your life as a daily or weekly practice? What would this look like? What changes would you need to make?

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This practice can also be used to counter stress in the moment. How could G.L.A.D. be adapted as a stress management tool?

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## H.E.A.L. with Cooperative Listening

Do you ever get defensive when talking with a significant person in your life? That happens to everyone. And when that happens, the stress response makes it difficult for us to listen. Worse, discordant events like this, if habitual, can cause harm and damage to a relationship. Fortunately, the following practice offers a way to cool yourself down, even as you are listening to another.

### Instructions

The acronym that follows can give you greater skill at listening to another in a way that lowers reactivity and defensiveness. Write this acronym down on a note card and practice the steps so that you remember them.

This practice doesn't mean you can't have an opinion, but that you can listen in a new way. You might find that you can strengthen relationships with this method.

Use this practice in the moment—anytime you notice that things are heating up and that you're feeling defensive.

### H — *Hold Assumptions*

No matter what you might believe, it's not possible to make space for another's ideas and thoughts if your "cup" is filled to the brim with your own preconceived ideas and biases. Empty your cup of your own assumptions even for five minutes. Then get curious about where the other person is coming from.

### E — *Empathy to Engage, Not Enrage*

Step into the emotional world of the person with whom you are conversing. Do this by having empathy for their plight and feelings. Can you feel their feelings? Empathy engages others, whereas being closed or defensive can enrage.

### A — *Absorb and Accept*

Be like a sponge that takes in all you hear. Absorbing another's perspective can take time, so absorb as much as you can. Acceptance doesn't mean you agree, but that you can accept this is where things are right now. Acceptance means you don't need to try to fix anything. Just take it in and accept the moment.

### L — *Lead with Respect and Kindness*

So after you've done all of the above, what happens next? How do you reply or respond? Whatever you do, lead with respect and kindness. If you are not able to do that in the moment—and that's

okay—let this person know that you would like time to think about what has been said. Sometimes, we need to reflect before we can respect. You can step back and tap your wisdom and insight, or consult with a wise friend or mentor. If you cannot speak without anger, wait until you are ready to respond with respect, kindness, and compassion.

### **Reflections**

What was it like to use the H.E.A.L. practice? Which of these steps was the easiest for you? Which was the most challenging?

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When is a time you can use the H.E.A.L. practice? Who might you want to use this with?

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What is one positive thing that could come from using this practice during an argument or disagreement?

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How might this affect a relationship or make talking about a difficult topic a little easier? How useful would it be for a partner to also use this practice?

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How could you practice this so that you could easily remember it—even in the heat of the moment? What would that practice look like?

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## Five Steps to Presence

Did you ever have the experience of being with someone, but they really weren't with you? Maybe they were distracted, looking at their phone or the computer, or maybe they had something else on their mind. We've all experienced this in one form or another. But if it's an ongoing pattern, it doesn't build a sense of mutuality and togetherness.

It's kind of like the little phrase on the back of a carnival or game ticket that reads: "You must be present to win." In the same way, you must give your full presence to the significant persons in your life to have a sustainable relationship that feels joyful and alive.

These five simple steps can bring greater presence and mutuality into any relationship. If you are doing this with a partner, share how it feels to connect in this way.

### Instructions

#### Step 1 — *Get Grounded*

In order to get present with another, you first need to get present with your own self. How do you best get grounded in the here and now? Do you take a breath? Do you rub your hands together? Do you press your feet into the ground? Do you look at nature? Do you think about a favorite quotation? Use your mindful learning style to get present. If you don't know your learning style, see Tip #3, *Identifying and Implementing Mindful Learning Styles*.

#### Step 2 — *Attune with Self*

If you're going to connect with another, what are you "bringing to the table" in terms of your own emotions and bodily felt sense? If you are tense, it will help you to know that so you can either share that feeling or try to release it. The body holds emotions, and others will sense this. So first, get present and attune with your own felt sense.

By noting and naming the sensations, feelings, and emotions, you will help yourself regulate and get centered. (Tool #14, *Mind Regulation for Making Peace with the Mind*, can be a helpful practice.)

#### Step 3 — *Attune with Other*

Once you've come into a sense of awareness and attunement with yourself, let yourself attune with your partner or whoever you are with right now. Attuning means noticing how the other is holding the body as well as facial expressions. Use your empathy ability to feel the other person's emotional state. You don't have to say anything about it—unless you sense very obvious emotions such as anger, frustration, or grief. It's enough to let yourself sense and attune. If another is more animated, you might feel yourself getting more animated. If this person's emotions have them being quieter and subdued, then you can attune with that.

**Step 4 — *Narrow Focus and Attend***

Shut down the electronics, the phone, and any other distractions that may be grabbing your attention. Bring your focus to the one who is with you right now, right here. Attend to what is happening between you, even being aware of subtle movements and gestures. As well, attend to the needs of the other person and the relationship. If your partner needs comforting, assurance, or laughter, you can attend to that and be supportive in those ways.

**Step 5 — *Lean into Presence***

Let your presence be warm, inviting, and welcoming. Be open to the shared experience of now! Leaning into presence means you are not a bystander in the relationship, but are fully participating and engaging in it. Let your presence be felt.

**Follow-Up**

Take your time in getting familiar with these five steps of “presencing” with others. Practice these steps throughout the day until you eventually bring them all together. You may also want to journal your experiences on how differently interactions feel when using your full presence. See for yourself if greater joy and togetherness result when you use this practice.

## Spontaneous Play

Right now, think back on a time when you enjoyed playing with another. Did you feel connected to others? What made it so thrilling and so much fun? The freedom, lightness, and joy that come from spontaneous play is not just for children. It can be one of the perks of a playful state of mind.

What makes this spontaneous play different from other games you might have played is that there is no defined “winner” or “loser” here. The goal is simply to have fun and be spontaneous and in the moment. In spontaneous play everyone is a “winner” through mutual enjoyment. So what’s “the game”?

### **The game is that there is no game.**

Your role is to be spontaneous and in the moment, as if you were part of an improvisational troupe of actors. After all, isn’t life really an improvisation? It doesn’t matter if you are in the workplace trying to come up with a solution for a problem or at home planning a trip to the grocery store. Each moment presents you with entirely new situations, changing scenarios, and different persons to work with. So here are a few steps to engage in spontaneous play each day to enliven your relationships and get unstuck from your own stale patterns.

### **Instructions**

#### **Identify Your Role(s)**

Do you tend to take on a particular role? Often, we assume a role in our family or the workplace—even without trying. A role may feel comfortable because we’ve been playing that part. What role or roles do you typically assume? Remember, a role in this context is neither good nor bad.

Actors are not permanently the character they are playing, and neither are you the role you take on! Just because you may identify with a role doesn’t mean you can’t experiment with others—even for a short while. Circle the roles you play.

creative initiator	quiet caretaker of others
loyal follower	detached evaluator
confident know-it-all	needy approval seeker
skeptical resistor	supportive angel
disappearing wallflower	stable provider
harmonizing peacemaker	unpredictable trickster
boisterous, opinionated leader	carefree rogue

Write in other roles you play: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Let Go of Your Role(s)**

What would it be like for you to not be so attached to your present role? How is any current role confining you and defining you?

The *real* role you can play is to just be *you*, free of the baggage inherent in any role. This is just awareness itself, unfettered and open to possibility. Should you notice you are playing one of the “assigned” roles, allow yourself to release it and let it go.

**In the improvisation that is life, you don’t have to be defined by past or present roles.**

### **Participate Fully and Lovingly**

Any improvisation demands full presence and participation. If you are distracted or mentally elsewhere, then you are not fully present and committed to what is happening right now. Let yourself be more free and open than a particular role might allow for.

Being more spontaneous and free, however, doesn’t mean you have the right to harm or be rude to others. Remember that spontaneous play is a non-competitive sport. You’ll know it’s working when life is more alive, kind, and fun for all involved.

### **Share the Stage**

Since you are not doing spontaneous play alone, make sure to let your partner or others get creative. Allow yourself the ability to shift gears and go with the flow. What gets created in this spirit of play—even at home or at work—can often lead to some very useful and “out of the box” problem solving.

### **Release Expectations; Embrace the Process**

A lot of unnecessary suffering in life comes from the expectations we have about how things are “supposed to be,” including how others are “supposed” to act. But how can you truly experience spontaneous play if you’re using a predetermined script of what will happen? It is only by letting go of expectations that our relationships become more open, expressive, collaborative, creative, and ultimately, more loving.

### **Follow-Up**

Now that you’re familiar with the steps involved in spontaneous play, use the following questions to help decide how to implement it. For example, is there a particular area of your life (parenting, career, relationship, etc.) where being more free—and less attached to a role—might be helpful?

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What feels like the biggest challenge for you to improvise, or spontaneously play with others? What's the easiest thing about it? How and where could you try this out?

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What is one good thing that could come out of living in a less scripted way and letting go of expectations?

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## Forest Bathing Meditation

Some of the most soothing and calming things you can encounter are the most ordinary and natural. The idea of forest bathing—just being with trees—is a public health practice that has been used in Japan for many years.

In fact, research shows that nature can be helpful for reducing stress and mental fatigue. More than that, it gives you a time of quiet and peace away from the hectic, always turned-on high tech world. If you feel burned out, mentally fatigued, and unable to focus and be present with those you care about—a nature break, or vitamin N, might be just what you need. Best of all, it's easy to do.

**Note:** If you do this with another person, don't talk with one another until after going through the entire practice.

### Instructions

This may be the easiest practice in these pages! All you have to do is seek out a natural setting, preferably with trees. The benefits of being around trees have been studied, and it's actually beneficial for the immune system.

### Set Aside Time

This may seem like an odd instruction, but setting aside time makes the statement that you are making this a priority and taking it seriously. Allow yourself a minimum of 10 minutes to sit in nature—ideally 10–20 minutes. If you haven't done this before and you feel yourself getting impatient, that's normal. It can take time before the body registers that it's okay to relax.

Ideally, set a timer to ring in the allotted time so you don't have to keep checking the time.

If you only have two or three minutes to spend, start there. It's better to do a little forest bathing than none at all!

### Set Your Worries and Troubles Aside

Make a mental note to let go of your worries and thoughts for this time period. You might even imagine putting your "to-do list" or other thoughts in a mental filing cabinet that you can re-open after you have completed forest bathing.

### Find a Natural Setting

Any trees or greenery will work. Whether it's the courtyard of a business park, your backyard, some trees along the sidewalk, or a park you enjoy visiting. You can stand or sit or walk.

### Belly Breathe

Take nice, slow and long breaths as you inhale the fresh air that is being cleansed by the trees. Let these breaths calm and relax you deeply. Let your body relax more with each breath.



### **Absorb Yourself in Nature**

Cast your gaze out to the trees, the grass, the sky, and any other natural object. Don't just look superficially, but let your gaze penetrate deeply the nature with which you co-exist. Allow the mind to rest as you continue to absorb in nature. Get curious as you watch and observe. There's nothing more to do! Just be 100% devoted to being with nature in this moment. And the next moment. And the next.

### **Reflections**

What was it like to sit in nature in this way? What was most challenging about it for you? What was easiest?

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How long did it take until you really slowed down? How did this affect (if it did) the busyness of your mind?

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How did you refocus on the nature around you when your mind wandered?

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What did you notice about nature that you never knew before? What is one way that this practice could provide a benefit for you and a partner?

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How could you bring this practice into your day or life on a more consistent basis? What would this look like?

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## Letting It Be with Sky Gazing

Life often means having to deal with the impossible or unchangeable. Maybe you lost someone close to you, or maybe you endured a health issue that dramatically altered your life and relationships. There may be a way, however, to find a sense of peace.

It is called surrender. This is not to be confused with submission—which means you give up because you have no choice. Surrender is different, because it's a way of coming to peace when there are no easy answers. Surrendering lets you move forward in a different way, beyond rational thought.

### Instructions

Find a quiet place in nature with a view of the sky. You can stand or sit during this practice, but make sure you won't be interrupted for up to 10 minutes. You can always continue for a longer period of time if you want.

### Settle into the Body and Breath

Get settled in with a few nice diaphragmatic breaths. Notice the preciousness of each breath, how unique and special each one is. Take this next breath as if it were all that mattered to you right now.

Feel the body just as it is. This body, which comes from an ancient past, represents the accumulation of generations of wisdom. Tune into it now.

### Center with a Prayer, Affirmation, or Mantra

Your centering intention here is not to solve or resolve your problem, but to go *beyond* your problem. To just rest the mind in a place of quiet surrender to the larger process.

Use any meaningful prayer, affirmation, or mantra to center and rest the mind. One prayer of peace and surrender is the Serenity Prayer:

*God grant me the serenity  
To accept the things I cannot change;  
Courage to change the things I can;  
And the wisdom to know the difference.*

### Cast Your Gaze Skyward

Look upward into the vastness. Have a soft gaze as you look into the sky, staying open. Eyes open, mind open, skin open, body open, ears open, every cell in the body open.

### Release Your Personal Pain and Suffering without Expectation

As you Sky Gaze, release your worries into the vast, empty space above and beyond. With each exhale, release more, just letting it be.

Let the sky absorb and hold all your troubles. Release it all, let go of holding on and trying to change or fix it.

Surrender it now to the infinite vastness of the universe, which possesses a wisdom and meaning beyond our capabilities to understand. And that's okay. Just sit with the unknowable, unfathomable nature of things that are beyond the rational mind's need to know and control.

### **Rest in the Natural State of Interbeing**

As you sit, continue to breathe, letting the separation between you and nature dissolve.

Know that the sky you see is also present in your eyes.

Feel how the clouds that produce the water you drink become part of your body.

Marvel at how the particles from the universe's beginning also formed your own cells.

Just sit. Letting it be. Surrendering to the sky. And beyond.

### **Open**

As you open and surrender, make yourself available to whatever message or wisdom comes to you. This could be a feeling or knowing that is beyond words and which is felt in the body or elsewhere. It could be a flash of insight or awareness that comes to you in words or images. Or, you might just sit in silence. Whatever happens, you can know that it's all the blessing of this present moment. That not having to know is its own kind of relief, as well as a blessing.

### **Follow-Up**

Consider journaling your experiences. Share this with others if you are comfortable doing so. Even if what happened in the moment can't be re-created—and that's okay—you can still remember the sense of truth, peace, wisdom, blessing, or whatever it was that you felt in that moment.

## The All-Purpose Nature Transition

Did you ever notice that when you transition from one place to another—such as getting to an appointment, going to the airport for a flight, or making a trip to the mall—that your anxiety level goes up? And if you're not careful, you might even bring bad stress home with you after a stressful day on the job.

If your stress is affecting your relationships, you might want to consider this practice—alone or with a partner. With another, this offers a nice way to attain a shared awareness of a slower, gentle pace.

In addition, walking in a natural setting can help discharge negative stress so that it doesn't have to be passed on to those you care about.

### Instructions

Make sure to turn off your phone and stow any electronic devices where you won't be tempted to look at them or use them.

Find a place in nature where you can walk for 10 minutes, even longer. This can even be done in your backyard, down the street, at a park, or anywhere that it's quiet and where you can see nature. Ten minutes is recommended because it might take that long until your body actually slows down.

### Breathe

Are you noticing a theme here? Most of the contemplative practices begin by taking two or three calming breaths because that's how you turn on the body's relaxation response and slow everything down. Keep some awareness on your breath even as you walk.

### Intentionally Move and Walk

Mindful walking is an intentional practice. Whenever you do anything intentionally, it means that you're not just doing it by habit or mindlessly. Here, you'll be walking with a sense of purpose, making each step and movement in a deliberate way.

Simply, mindful walking consists of the following three-step process:

- Step 1 (Intention): Mentally set the intention to take a step.
- Step 2 (Action): Follow up by taking the step.
- Step 3 (Observe): Notice how your foot rises off the ground, moves through the air, how the heel and foot come down, and how your weight shifts from one side of the body to the other.

**Note:** By the way, if the above method doesn't feel natural to you, just allow yourself to flow, moving the body like a surfer becoming one with a wave or a skier moving as one with the slopes.

**Special Note:** Mindful walking may slow down the pace, so if your balance is compromised, move at a pace at which you feel safe and stable! Even walking at a normal pace is okay so long as you are present with your movements.

### **Pause to Notice Nature**

Remember to stop for a few moments to observe nature. Let yourself feel the rhythm of the nature around you. Allow yourself to move with the same kind of flow and ease. Most importantly, because this practice takes you off autopilot mode, you will take each step as if you have never taken a step before.

### **Reflections**

What was it like to walk in this way? What was most challenging about it for you? What was easiest?

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How long did it take until you really slowed down each step? How did this affect your balance? Did your mind stay focused on the intentional movement?

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How could you integrate this practice into your day? What would that look like?

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What is one way this practice could benefit you or others?

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## Rearrange Your Space and Relationships

Did you ever stop to think about how certain environments make you feel? Your work or home environment might even be affecting your relationships.

This can be done alone and with another—with both persons filling out their answers and then mutually and respectfully exploring all the ideas.

### Instructions

#### **PART 1 — *Reconnect with Nature***

For a few moments think about a place in nature that you love. Imagine all the things you find pleasant about the place: The colors, the objects, the sounds, the shapes, the smells, the textures, the brightness, the darkness, and the types of patterns. Also, include things you like that are related to spatial shape, such as tall, short, narrow, wide, expansive, and broad. Write these all down below:

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#### **Rearrange Your Living Space (Home, Work, Other)**

Choose a space that you'd like to rearrange. Then, refer back to the comments above to help you as you decide how to rearrange your space. This is just an exercise, and you don't really have to move anything. So allow yourself to freely change your existing space.

#### **Using your ideas from nature, answer these questions on a separate sheet of paper:**

- How could I create a more peaceful and comfortable space?
- What would create openness and spaciousness?
- How would others feel about moving things around?
- How would my home look if arranged differently?
- What would it feel like to have a fresher arrangement?
- What fears, worries, and concerns do I have about rearranging?
- What would it be like to rearrange just for the sake of rearranging?
- What would I move first?

- What pieces would be most difficult to move (physically and/or emotionally)?
- Would I need some new furniture to do this?
- How long would the process take? How long could I allow it to take?
- What would be the possible advantages of rearranging?
- What would be the possible disadvantages?
- What are the expectations I place on rearranging?
- What is the best/worst that would happen by rearranging?

## **PART 2 — *Rearrange Your Relationship (Partner, Work, Other)***

Now that you've rearranged a "space," let's see what it would be like to rearrange some aspects of home or work relationships. Again, this is just an exercise and you don't really have to rearrange or change anything. So allow yourself to freely consider how you might change any existing relationship. Then, feel what that might be like.

- How could I create a more peaceful and comfortable relationship?
- What would create openness and spaciousness in the relationship?
- What would others feel about my rearranging the relationship?
- How would my relationship feel and look if arranged differently?
- What would it feel like to have a fresher relationship?
- What fears, worries, and concerns do I have about rearranging the relationship?
- What would it be like to rearrange the relationship just for the sake of rearranging?
- What would be hardest thing to rearrange in the relationship?
- What would I change first?
- What aspects would be most difficult to change (emotionally)?
- Would I need help to rearrange this relationship?
- How long would the process take? How long could I allow it to take?
- What would be the possible advantages of rearranging my relationship?
- What would be the possible disadvantages of rearranging it?
- What expectations do I place on changing my relationship?
- What is the best/worst that would happen by rearranging?

## **Reflections**

What did you discover about your willingness to rearrange your living space and relationship? What is the connection between these for you?

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How could the process of rearranging your living space also change your relationship?

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What would have to happen for you to begin rearranging—both your living space and relationship—in ways that would give you greater peace, confidence, and safety? What would be your next step?

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What one small step could you take this week (rearranging your living space or relationship) that could produce a positive result in your life?

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## Nature's Relationship Repair Kit

For those times that a relationship is in a rut or when you've had a disagreement with someone and still have hard feelings, one possible way to move forward and repair things is by using nature.

Nature has been shown to have properties that make us calmer and even enhance feelings of kindness and caring. If you feel stuck, this handout might offer a positive way to shift toward a new mindset. This handout is something that both partners do together.

### Instructions

Look at the steps below. You will go through this *in advance* and make decisions together about where and when to go to nature. This way, you won't have to think about it when feeling upset. You will already know exactly what to do.

### Step 1 — *Openness and Willingness*

For this to work, it's important in advance that each partner be willing to try this nature repair. Answer the following questions together: How have strategies for repairing arguments or issues worked for you in the past? Would it be worth trying a new strategy? What's the worst that could happen? What's the best that could happen?

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### Step 2 — *Agree on a Nature Setting*

What nature setting is easy to get to that you and another both like? Ideally this would be a place where you can walk. Alternatively, you might also agree to visiting each other's favorite nature setting. Write down your top three places to visit that are within 10–20 minutes away. If you have a favorite place that is further away, how could you make that work without too much advance planning?

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### Step 3 — *Pre-arranged Travel Kit*

Before you even go, what things would you like to take with you? You can put anything you want in your "Travel Kit," such as something to eat, a blanket for sitting on, hiking or walking shoes, a ball, a

Frisbee, etc. The idea here is that you will have these items all together and ready to go at a moment's notice. Write down what you'd like to take with you.

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#### **Step 4 — *When to Go?***

How will you know the time is right for you and another to make the nature trip? This is for the two of you to decide. You might decide that either partner can make the decision if they feel it would be useful. You might decide that certain behavior means you need to take the trip. You know these trigger points better than anyone, so write your thoughts below.

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#### **Step 5 — *Repair Process Takes Time***

Once you're in nature, it will take time for nature to work its magic. The time you are in nature is NOT the time to revisit or repeat the argument or disagreement that took place earlier. You will have time for that later. The purpose of nature is to help you get calm, grow softer, and to reconnect in a more mindful and compassionate way with the one you are with.

If, while in nature, you happen to feel that you can speak in a more compassionate way and without anger, then you may decide to do so. In the space below, write down your agreement to allow nature to be healing. After nature has calmed and soothed, how do you see a conversation or other relationship repair occurring?

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#### **Step 6 — *Take Several Practice Runs***

What will you do in nature? How long will feel right until you settle in and feel calmer, more at ease, and playful? What activities work best? The best way—maybe the only way—to find out what works best is to take several "practice runs" by going out and putting into practice everything you've written here. You may decide you need to revise what's in your "Pre-arranged Travel Kit." Add further thoughts about practicing here.

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#### **Review and Revise**

Once you've actually experienced nature in the way described above, feel free to make changes. You will learn what works best for you and others. Above all, be flexible and adaptable as you apply these ideas.

## Two-getherness at Mealtime

Mealtime offers an opportunity to establish a sense of togetherness. It's the perfect time to share experiences of the day and to offer positive messages to those around you. However you may have experienced mealtime in the past, you can create a nurturing ritual of your own.

Here are some suggestions for elevating any mealtime from the mundane and ordinary into the realm of the special and extraordinary.

### **Instructions**

The ideas below are just suggestions, so pick the ones you like best. As with any practice, consistency is important, so even if you do this once or twice a week, you can make that your special mealtime.

### **Create an Island of Peace**

To make mealtime a true island of peace, remove technology and distractions such as:

- Turn off all phones so there is no texting or checking devices.
- Avoid watching TVs, computers, and other distractions.
- Leave enough time for talking before and after the meal.

### **Beautify and Invite in Nature**

What would make this meal a little more special? What natural elements, such as scents and sounds can add to your meal? Some ideas include:

- Flowers
- Plants
- Candles
- Soft lighting
- Soothing music
- Special table setting
- Eating outside when possible

### **Mindfully Select and Prepare the Food**

Allow extra time to prepare the meal in an unrushed way. Choose foods that are nutritious and wholesome, and containing as few processed ingredients as possible. Work together as a team to prepare the meal.

### **Start with a Mealtime Blessing**

There are many books filled with different kinds of mealtime blessings. Even a moment of silence before the meal is a good way for centering. If desired, take turns saying the blessing.

### **Share Something Positive During the Meal**

There are many ways to share something positive from the day's experiences. Consider having each person share one of the following:

- One thing of gratitude that was noticed.
- One delightful occurrence that made you smile.
- The G.L.A.D. experiences of the day (Tool #37, *Softening with G.L.A.D.*).
- One kind thing that happened.
- One thing to appreciate about each person at the dinner table.

### **Conclude with a Moment of Appreciation or Silence**

Transitioning out of mealtime is often forgotten. Whether holding hands or sitting for a moment in silence, you acknowledge that this meal was special.

Finally, mindfully share in the clean-up.

### **Reflections**

What would be the most challenging thing about creating this kind of a mealtime with your partner and others? What is the easiest thing about it? If you haven't done this kind of a meal in a while, how could you start?

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What is one positive thing that could come from creating an island of peace around mealtime for your relationships? Even if you did this for yourself, what one positive thing could come from it?

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## Attune to Nature's Pace

There's an interesting Zen saying that goes like this:

*Sitting quietly,  
doing nothing,  
spring comes,  
and the grass grows by itself.*

How effortless that sounds. What incredible patience a blade of grass must have. Could things really be that natural? Maybe they could be, if only we learned to attune with the natural world. To move at the pace of nature means that we could accept where we are right now. Imagine if an acorn wanted to be a fully mature oak tree by tomorrow. What frustration and impatience and suffering it would experience!

Nature illustrates the importance of rhythm and pace, and the value of taking things one step at a time. Attuning with nature can cultivate a deeper understanding and acceptance for not worrying about things over which we have no control, as well as the people over whom we have no control.

Try this practice alone, or with a partner, and then compare notes.

### **Instructions**

Set aside 20 minutes to do this practice. Do this practice when you won't feel pressured by other obligations. It's important that you recognize that only by allowing enough time can you experience this attunement.

### **Be Present with Nature's Rhythm**

This is unlike the other nature practices because you are looking for the way nature moves.

Notice the flow, the effort, the rhythm, the pace, the patience, the persistence, the tenacity, and the purposefulness.

Maybe you will see a bee as it weaves through the air or a worm arching slowly through the grass. Watch how leaves dance in the breeze.

Just observe. With full presence for as long as you want. What must that be like to move or be like that?

### **Breathe with Nature**

Allow your breath to come into the cadence of nature surrounding you. Let it move you, rather than you moving it. There's nothing to force. Come to peace with the breath just as it is, effortless and light, just like the sun that shines and the leaf that absorbs the sunlight.

### **Move as Nature**

Although we are mammals, we can mimic other forms of nature. So now, have fun and allow yourself to move like the nature around you.

Let your body stretch as your arms reach up to the sky like a tall tree. Roll on the grass like your cat if you want! Move like the gentle breeze. Let your feet feel the earth, the ground. Continue to move in this way for as long as you want.

### **Be Real as Nature**

Say what you will about nature, one thing is for certain. It's real, authentic, and not trying to be anything else. A tree makes no pretenses about wanting to be taller or thinner than it is. Neither does it get impatient for spring so its buds can finally appear. There is no wanting, no craving.

This is deep peace. Total unlimited patience.

It's the peace of taking the next breath without even trying.

Not a worry. It all gets done.

And springtime still comes.

And the grass still grows by itself.

### **Be Strong as Nature**

Without even trying nature has a quiet persistence, strength, and resilience. As is written in the Tao:

*The softest waters carve the hardest stone.*

Notice and attune with the strength of nature. Notice it in the big things and the smallest of things. Now, sense your own strength.

### **Reflections**

After you spend time in nature, journal your experience. You might want to share this with someone close to you. Or, use these reflections to explore. What did you notice by attuning with nature in these ways?

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What would it be like to attune with nature in your relationship? How would things be different?

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How did it feel to move at the pace of nature? How could this change your attitudes about patience and acceptance?

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What wisdom or lessons could you take from nature that speak to your own strength, resilience, persistence, and tenacity?

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## Three Steps to Tending Your Relationship Garden

Did you ever care for a plant? Even if you haven't, you know that plants require the right amount of light, water, nutrients from the soil, and enough space to take root and grow. When you think about it, relationships have similar needs. But if they don't get the proper attention, love, caring, compassion, play, and so on, they can get in a rut and slowly wither on the vine, so to speak.

Even if a relationship—or plant for that matter—is struggling, the proper care will renew and rejuvenate it.

### Instructions

Read the poem that follows, then look at the steps for tending your own relationship garden.

*Each Spring I plant a friendship field  
with seeds of loving-kindness.  
Every day I nurture my field  
with caring words, actions, joys, and hopes.  
I water it often with compassion and laughter.  
Come harvest time my field overflows,  
with enough friendship to warm and sustain me,  
during even the darkest, coldest winter.*

### Step 1 — Seed Your Garden with Kind Speech and Intentions

Intentions are like the seeds that, once planted and watered, grow into mature plants. Are your intentions for the relationship coming from your own selfish desires? Or, are they oriented toward what you can give to another—respect, understanding, acceptance, compromise, etc.—thus including the “We” perspective?

Likewise, is your speech kind and loving, in both tone and content? Harsh, unkind, and spiteful words are not easily forgotten, and they are just the kind of thing that can keep any relationship from flowering and thriving.

In the space below, write down the positive intentions you can start planting. Also, write down your intention to use kind speech, along with a description of what that would look like.

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**Step 2 — *Water Your Garden with Daily Actions of Love, Generosity and Laughter***

The love and laughter you demonstrate each day keeps your relationship alive and growing. What's more, by depositing more laughter into your relationship "bank," you build up a buffer of good will that can counterbalance the challenges. How do you lighten up your relationship? Is your time with another focused on the complaints of life? Surely, it's okay to rant every now and then—but even rants can be done in a spirit of fun.

In the space below, honestly assess the attitude, generosity, and lightness you bring into your relationship. How could you bring in more sunshine and sprinkle the relationship with loving touches to keep it engaged, joyous, and alive?

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**Step 3 — *Feed Your Garden with the Nutrients of Understanding and Compassion***

There is perhaps no better way to tend and grow your relationship garden than to offer your compassion, understanding, and forgiveness. No one is perfect, and your partner must endure conditions in life that produce suffering. Given that knowledge, you can be the gardener who shields his or her plants from stormy and extreme weather. In the space below, write down some of the ways you can nurture your relationship with these special and enduring qualities.

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## What Is Your Relationship Season?

You know what season it is, but do you know what “season” your relationship is in?

Nature teaches us a lot about how things naturally change over time. For example, springtime is filled with new growth, energy, excitement, and hope—just like many new relationships. If someone you know has ever commented on how their relationship has drastically changed, then they’ve likely identified a new season without even knowing it.

When changes occur in a relationship, these may not necessarily be bad. It might mean that a relationship has entered another phase, or season. By understanding the seasons below, you’ll have a better awareness and insight into your own relationship. Often, relationships start in springtime and go through the various seasons. But each relationship is unique.

### Instructions

Look through each of the season descriptions here. Relationships are varied and unique, so your relationship season may have many or only a few of the qualities mentioned. Let your gut sense tell you what season your relationship is in.

Afterwards, answer the reflections and compare your findings with your partner.

### Spring Relationship Season

Spring relationships are brimming with energy, excitement, hope, positivity, and new love. There might be a roller coaster of moods in this season, even feelings of insecurity and worry because you don’t know how this particular “ride” will turn out. But there is also a lot of hope for the future. Your partner might seem so ideal that you can’t believe your good luck! This is a time of sensuality, intimacy, romance, togetherness, and passion. This season often brings heightened feelings of positive emotions. This season is filled with “on the edge of your seat” anticipation for the joys you will find together.

### Summer Relationship Season

Summer relationships have settled in. The roller coaster of emotions has been replaced by a less exciting, but safer and more secure ride. This season fills you with the warm feelings of pleasure, activity, planning, and love. Despite conflicts, there are still new things to experience. There are plans and goals and things to achieve. The relationship expands outward during this season, often inviting in new friends and family. It might seem like there’s nothing you can’t do this summer if you desire it!

### Fall Relationship Season

Fall relationships mean that the tempo is slowing down. Conflicts and differences may appear larger, and there could be less activity, energy, and striving for new things—and romantic energy and emotions may have cooled down as well. For some, there might be a sense of comfort and ease with the way things are, as well as an attitude of contentment, appreciation, and peace. Partners might

seek their own hobbies or paths to joy. This separateness might bring emotional coldness, sadness, or disappointment; for others, it could bring happiness, connectedness, and joy for one's partner.

### **Winter Relationship Season**

Winter relationships are a time for quietude and reflection. Activity might feel like it's come to a standstill. There's little or no emotional energy left to expend, or there might be irrational emotional outbursts. Depending on life experiences related to loss, betrayal, and mistrust, there could be emotional coldness that leads to a review of the relationship's dreams and hopes. Health, financial loss, and emotional distance can bring doubt about the future. There might be the feeling that the relationship cannot survive this harsh season.

### **Reflections**

After looking through the seasons above, what seasons has your relationship experienced so far? Have your seasons jumped around or happened one after the other?

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What season seems to typify where you are at right now? How do you feel about this? What's the hardest thing about this season? What's the easiest?

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A relationship that included something from all the different seasons would be a well-balanced one. What parts of other seasons would you borrow that could make your relationship stronger? What is one tangible action or thing that would help to do that?

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No relationship season is innately good or bad. How can you grow from this current season, and how can that help you to move forward?

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## Sun Breathing B.L.E.S.S. Meditation

This meditation is a nice practice to do by yourself or with another. Also, it can be done either indoors or outside, whichever works best. You can be flexible in how you use this. You could do this briefly before or after a walk, in the morning or when you return from work, at night before bedtime. If you use it at night, you can call it a Moon Breathing Meditation!

Practice this a few times so you know it, and one person can lead you in the meditation. Or just read the words below as a guide.

### Instructions

This is a meditation for finding peace within and with another. Begin by finding a quiet place in nature where you won't be interrupted. Or, you can do this in your own home looking out at nature or in any room.

### Stand Tall like a Tree

To start, stand up with your feet firmly planted on the ground. Imagine yourself rooted and grounded like one of the trees before you, or one of your favorite trees. If you have a partner, stand side by side about five or six feet apart, but both looking in the same direction, facing nature.

Stand nice and tall, just like that tree. Now, follow along with the acronym B.L.E.S.S.

### B — *Breathe*

This B means take some nice relaxed belly breaths. This is slow and rhythmic breathing. Don't try too hard. Just let the breath be easy, with no effort. Let the breath move your body, almost like the breeze that causes a tree to slightly sway and move.

Good, there's no rush. Now just bring awareness to how you are breathing with another. Each of you is sharing this precious moment, noticing the trees, and being with one another. You breathe the same air, you are rooted in the same ground. Let yourself feel how the earth and the air are also part of you. Now we will move on to the letter L in the B.L.E.S.S. acronym.

### L — *Love*

The L stands for love. So right now, let yourself feel the heart center in your body as it opens up. And let it radiate and pour out the love of compassion for all living things. Let this healing, expansive love go throughout your own body, too, letting it absorb deeply into all your cells, from the bottom of your feet to your fingertips to the top of your head. You can also breathe in love from the earth beneath your feet. Allow that to come in, too.

Just stand for a few more moments, breathing and basking in the warm glow of love from within and without. Wonderful. Now let's move to the letter E.

## **E — Elevate**

The E stands for elevate, as in slowly raise your arms upward with palms facing up. Like tree branches let your arms reach up until they settle in to comfortable height. Continue to breathe and warm yourself with love.

The E in elevate also means “elevate your view,” as in imagine yourself high on a mountaintop with an unlimited view of the world below you. (You can close your eyes if you want to.) From this majestic point of view all the worries of the world seem smaller, and there is a feeling of spaciousness, wholeness, and completeness.

Just rest for a moment longer, absorbing the love that this world is capable of, and sensing all who make it a safer and more compassionate place. Wonderful!

Now let’s move on to the first S in our B.L.E.S.S. acronym.

## **S — Sun**

The S stands for sun, the light that illuminates and warms and makes life possible. Even if you are inside or cannot see the sun, close your eyes and imagine the warmth of the bright sun as it blankets your upward-facing palms with light and heat. Let your palms be like the leaves on a tree. Let this life-giving source energize and harmonize within you. Continue to feel the warm love radiating from your heart, as it mixes with the sun’s energy, making you feel radiant, joyful, energized, and strong.

Still, be aware of the presence of your partner standing nearby as you both breathe in the sun and feel the radiance of joy from your elevated view.

## **S — Sacredness**

The last S stands for sacredness, which is the sacredness of the body and mind—which you intimately experience. It’s also the sacredness of the sun, the earth, the air, the sky, the world—that you can experience intimately, as part of you.

Very slowly, bring the hand that is closest to your partner down until your hands touch. Hold hands as you continue to breathe, feeling love from your heart now circulating and radiating not just into your own body, but into your partner’s body. Feel and appreciate the sacredness between the two of you for a minute or so.

When you are done, bring your palms together in front of the heart center.

If you want, you can conclude this meditation by giving thanks for the blessings in your life. And you can make a commitment to reducing harm in all your relationships through offering compassion, understanding, and kindness.