



ANANIAS  
FOUNDATION



# THE GUIDEBOOK

Discover Hope • Find Help • Experience Healing



Guidance and encouragement for people  
who have been violent or abusive with  
their partner but want to change

# Welcome

Hi.

If you picked up this book and you're now reading this letter, there is a good chance that at some point, your actions toward your partner have been violent or harmful.

There is also a good chance that this issue is affecting your life in a serious way. Perhaps it's damaging your relationship, disrupting your home and family life, or getting you in trouble with the law.

If you're hoping this workbook might help you sort out the mess, there's good news—it can!

First off, you should know that you and I have something in common. A few years ago, I was where you are. I felt scared, hopeless, and confused about the things I'd done and the trouble I was in. I wanted to change and was looking for answers on how, but there were few to be found. You can read more about [my journey](http://www.ananiasfoundation.org/founders-profile/) on our website ([www.ananiasfoundation.org/founders-profile/](http://www.ananiasfoundation.org/founders-profile/)).

That's why I started the Ananias Foundation (more about that later) and, with the help of some remarkable people, put together this Guidebook. We've worked hard to make everything as practical and realistic as we can, so you can take away useful lessons and techniques to apply to your life.

The first step—reaching out for help—is often the hardest. But by picking up this Guidebook, you've already taken that step. Will it give you everything you need to change the behavior that is not serving you well? Probably not. Our goal is to get you started on the right path and introduce you to practical tools that will help you on your journey.

While this is not a quick fix, it is so worth it. Your motivation, openness to change, and effort are the most important ingredients. I am certain you can do it. And when you do, your relationships with your loved ones, with friends, with colleagues, with strangers, and most importantly, with yourself will be transformed for the better.

I care about you and want a better life for you. I want to help you discover the freedom of relationships without violence or abuse once and for all. Change is possible!

Peace and blessings for your journey,



Michael Clark, Founder

Ananias Foundation



# How to Get the Most from this Guidebook

This Guidebook is divided into ten sessions and designed so that you can work through it on your own, with a mentor or counselor, or in a group. Each session builds on the next, so we recommend you work through them in order.

Throughout the Guidebook you'll find:

- **“Reflection”** questions, which encourage you to think about how the concepts we discuss apply to you and your life.
- **“Viewpoints”** which we hope will help you look at related topics in a different light.
- **Exercises** at the end of each session, which you can either complete in this Guidebook or your own journal.

We suggest you allow yourself at least a week between each session to do the exercises, practice applying the concepts in real life, and reflect on the outcomes.

Here's how you can get the most out of your time working through this Guidebook:

- **Do the work.** Read and answer the questions as fully as you can. Dig in deeper when you get the opportunity. Don't skip the Reflection and Exercise sections, as these are an important part of the process.
- **Write out your answers.** There is something about writing that makes us think harder and helps us remember. Plus, it will give you something to refer back to later.
- **Be honest.** This is not school. The exercises are not graded and you are not being judged for your answers. Being honest with yourself is the best way to grow and change, so it only hurts you if you're not.
- **Finish.** Doing just part of the course will leave an incomplete picture of how to change. It is unlikely you will get the results you're looking for.

If you are going through this Guidebook with a group, here are some specific recommendations:

- **Confidentiality.** What is said in the group stays in the group.
- **Attendance.** Missing a session means you miss a piece of the solution. Make it a priority to attend each session.
- **Participation.** Everyone benefits when you share your experiences. Others probably have similar thoughts, fears, and events in their life, even if they haven't talked about them yet.
- **Listening.** Learning from other participants' experiences means you get the benefit of their knowledge without having to make the same mistakes yourself!



## Faith Perspective Pages

This Guidebook is based on tried-and-true concepts that help people make lasting changes to their behavior. It would be thoughtless of us, however, if we didn't share another factor that can make a BIG difference in a person's transformation: a relationship with God. So, we've included a unique feature in this Guidebook: "**Faith Perspective**" pages.

Why did we do this? Spirituality in general helps us make sense of the world, answering first-order questions of life such as "Why am I here?" and "What is my purpose?" As you'll see later, it can also resolve doubts we have about ourselves, like "Am I lovable, valuable, and worthy?" Spirituality offers a wider perspective on the challenges we face, and allows us to rely on a power greater than ourselves for things that are beyond our control.

Specifically, we want to point you to the benefits and power of having a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. To introduce you to this relationship, the Faith Perspective pages will hopefully begin to show you who God is—the holy, all-powerful, creator of the universe—and give you a glimpse of how he sees you, his beloved child.

Each Faith Perspective page contains a verse from the Bible—God's love letter to you—and a brief explanation of how that message connects to the material we're covering. We've also included some reflection questions for you to ponder. Through these pages, we hope you will discover how relevant this relationship is to your life and the journey you're on.

Most importantly, we hope these few pages will encourage you to spend even more time getting to know God and hearing what he has to say to you. This will be so helpful in realizing the peaceful, abundant life he intended you to have.

If spirituality just isn't for you, or you've had some bad experiences with religion, we are sorry to hear it. Sadly, sometimes we humans have misrepresented who God truly is. We hope you'll keep an open mind and peruse these Faith Perspective pages anyway. Don't let bad experiences or preconceived notions prevent you from exploring the true goodness and power of this relationship.

There is more in [The God Factor](http://www.ananiasfoundation.org/the-god-factor) section on the Ananias Foundation website ([www.ananiasfoundation.org/the-god-factor](http://www.ananiasfoundation.org/the-god-factor)) about what it means to have a relationship with God, why it matters, and how to get it. You can get started now, however, with the first Faith Perspective on the next page.



# Faith Perspective

“For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.”

—[Jeremiah 29:11](#)

What messes and hardships are you experiencing in your life? Do they leave you feeling hopeless, overwhelmed, frustrated, or angry?

The prophet Jeremiah wrote the above verse at a time when his homeland was falling apart. It would soon be invaded by an enemy nation and its people hauled off as slaves. He could see this disaster coming, and he was writing these God-inspired words to not only warn his countrymen and women of the coming hardship, but also give them hope for their future.

Jeremiah's peers were far from innocent victims. They had wandered far from the kind of life God wanted them to live. Still, God promised to restore and bless them, regardless of what they had done wrong. God will do the same for you today as he did when Jeremiah wrote these words.

Does it surprise you to know that, despite anything bad you may have done, God *wants* to bless you—to give you a life that is filled with abundance and joy? What's more, God never leaves us. He doesn't always take away the consequences or pain we're going through as a result of our poor choices, but he is always there for us.

Much of the book of Jeremiah calls on people to turn around—to change the way they think, so they can be restored into this right relationship with God. In this relationship, we listen to God, follow his instructions, and receive his blessings, rather than being left to fend for ourselves.

The Bible is filled with similar stories along the same theme. God loves the people he created, including you. He wants to be in a relationship with you. He only asks that you trust and follow him. He promises a good future for you when you do.

Find hope in Jeremiah's words. Discover how God wants you to live. Develop a relationship with him. You'll be blessed beyond belief when you do.

## Reflection

What things in your life seem to be falling apart?

How might God be calling you to turn around or change the way you are thinking?

What do you hope your future looks like?



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**SESSION I**

The Journey Ahead

# Welcome

In this session, we'll start by looking at what brought you here—maybe some losses you've recently suffered in your life, or some things you value that you are at risk of losing. We're also going to consider what you have to gain—ways your life can permanently become better than ever. Finally, we'll introduce you to a new skill that you can start using right away to kick-start your journey. We'll build on this new skill over the next few sessions. So how about it? Are you ready to start? Let's go!

## Why am I here?

This course was designed for individuals who have been violent or abusive toward their partner and want to stop. These actions are called “domestic violence” or “domestic abuse,” but you'll soon see we don't use those terms much in this Guidebook. The reason is these terms have a lot of stigma attached to them—and therefore tend to create a lot of shame.

Shaming you is not what we're here to do. We know you're here for a reason: to change. Good for you. And even though that transformation can be difficult, we're here to help.

While we don't necessarily know your story, we do know that you're absolutely *not alone*. That fact alone will hopefully make you feel a little better. Others have gone before you and navigated this path successfully, and so can you.

Maybe you're here out of desperation. You don't want to get into trouble (or more trouble) with the law. Perhaps you don't want to lose a relationship, or you already lost one and don't want that to keep happening in your life. Maybe someone confronted you about your behavior, and you're afraid they might be right. That's okay. Whatever your reasons for starting this journey of change, we're glad you're here, and we're confident you'll love the results when you reach the end.

“There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation, hard work, and learning from failure.”

—Colin Powell



## Reflection

Why did you pick up this Guidebook or join this group?

What do you hope will happen as a result of working through this Guidebook or participating in this group?

What changes do you need to make to get those results?

What benefits will you gain as a result of those changes?

On a scale of 1 to 10, how ready are you to change?

**Low** 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 **High**

Why didn't you rate yourself higher or lower?

“Change your thoughts and you change your world.”

—Norman Vincent Peale



# What to expect from this course

## A long hike, but a great journey

This transformation—from being someone who has hurt their loved ones, to being able to enjoy a healthy, safe, violence-free relationship—is truly an epic journey. We think of it like going on a long, challenging, sometimes treacherous, but ultimately very rewarding hike.

Maybe it's corny, but we used a lot of hiking words and analogies in this Guidebook (there's one now). Hopefully the comparison will help you see how each session builds on the last as you go along the path. And more importantly, we hope it prepares and motivates you even when the going gets tough.

## What's ahead on the trail

This session, Session 1, looks at why you might be on this hike and hopefully starts you increasing the awareness of what is going on in your mind. In the next one, Session 2, we'll learn some quick escape techniques for when we're caught in an avalanche—those big blow-ups that get us into trouble.

In Sessions 3 and 4, we'll begin to identify avalanche *risk*. We'll get a better understanding of the sensitive issues and distorted thoughts that lead us down the path to harmful reactions, and look at techniques to change our thinking. This makes us less likely to get into dangerous situations to begin with.

In Session 5, we look at the underlying causes of our sensitive spots: those painful past experiences, like fault lines in the earth, that haunt us as we follow the trail. Then in Session 6 we look at how to handle uncomfortable thoughts and feelings that may not be life-threatening, but can still be a burden—like a stone in our shoe.

In Session 7, we'll talk about what to do when our significant other isn't necessarily being the ideal hiking partner. Session 8 covers the topic of boundaries—a useful concept to apply to difficult partners and in all our relationships. In Session 9, we'll go over some helpful skills that will make your journey easier, and in Session 10 we'll consider what safely reaching your destination looks like.

## Be prepared

While “Be prepared” is the well-known motto of the Boy Scouts, it applies here, too. One way to prepare before we get started is to read [How to Get the Most from this Guidebook](#), if you haven't already.

Another thing we'll say is this: be prepared to feel uncomfortable at times. You may find yourself confused. You may find some ideas challenging or very different to how you thought things worked. You may have to face a couple of wild animals or go to some scary places along your way (ok, maybe not literally). They're all necessary parts of the journey. Remember, we are right here with you, like a faithful guide.



## Reflection

What is your biggest fear about this journey of transformation?

What might prevent you from finishing it?

## The source of actions

You've probably already heard unhelpful suggestions like "You shouldn't hit your partner" or "Just stop." And if it were that easy, you wouldn't be here, right?

But you might not have heard someone admit: it's *not* that easy. Reactions happen in the blink of an eye. We fall back into old patterns of behavior without even thinking of trying a new one, even if we know the new one will be better for us. Why is that?

Well—did you know that your actions, especially those actions that are more like *reactions*, start from your thoughts? Certain thoughts create emotions, which then cause reactions.



Now here's the good news about this concept. By handling the thoughts that cause trouble in a different way, you'll have different, less powerful emotions. And *that* will give you the space you need to keep control of your actions and choose better responses, even in really tough situations.



Trying to change your actions without going to their source—your mind—is like trying to hold a beach ball under water. Sure, you can do it for a while, but eventually you are going to get distracted or tired, and the ball is going to come popping up out of the water.

Changing the thought patterns that are at the *root* of the behavior you are trying to change is like letting the air out of the beach ball. Doing it this way takes a little more time and effort now, but it's a better and more permanent fix, not just a temporary one.

Many of us are not in the habit of paying close attention to our thoughts and emotions. However, having good awareness and control of them leads to all kinds of benefits in our intimate relationships, friendships, work and career, and even how we feel about ourselves and our life.

So rather than focusing on the behavior you want to change, we are going to get to the root cause of it, working backwards through the Thoughts > Emotions > Actions chain. We're not going to do a lot with that information just yet. For now, we're simply going to help you practice recognizing the emotions, and then the thoughts behind those emotions, that lead to particular actions. We'll build on this process throughout the Guidebook.

## Reflection

Think about something you said or did that you regret. Maybe it was an action that got you into trouble with your partner or the law. Most of us can come up with a whole list of them, but just pick one for now and write it down.

What happened? What was it you did that you now regret?

“Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think.”

—[Romans 12:2](#)



# Emotions behind that action

Now, try to identify what your emotions you were feeling when you said or did that thing you regret. Generally, we don't like or feel comfortable with these feelings. We're starting here because it will often help you determine what your thoughts were, and therefore, to change your behavior.

Sometimes, it can be hard to come up with the right words to describe how you felt in those moments. Here's a list of words that you can use when you want to describe the emotion(s) that you might have been feeling. It's not necessarily a complete list of every emotion, but it might be a good starting place to help you. Try to go beyond the obvious to identify exactly what you're feeling inside.

| Angry      | Sad           | Anxious    | Hurt       | Embarrassed    | Happy       |
|------------|---------------|------------|------------|----------------|-------------|
| Grumpy     | Disappointed  | Afraid     | Jealous    | Isolated       | Thankful    |
| Frustrated | Mournful      | Stressed   | Betrayed   | Self-conscious | Trusting    |
| Annoyed    | Regretful     | Vulnerable | Isolated   | Lonely         | Comfortable |
| Defensive  | Depressed     | Confused   | Shocked    | Inferior       | Content     |
| Spiteful   | Paralyzed     | Bewildered | Deprived   | Guilty         | Excited     |
| Impatient  | Pessimistic   | Skeptical  | Victimized | Ashamed        | Relaxed     |
| Disgusted  | Tearful       | Worried    | Aggrieved  | Repugnant      | Relieved    |
| Offended   | Dismayed      | Cautious   | Tormented  | Pathetic       | Elated      |
| Irritated  | Disillusioned | Nervous    | Abandoned  | Confused       | Confident   |

Source: "3 Ways to Better Understand Your Emotions" by Susan David, retrieved from: <https://hbr.org/2016/11/3-ways-to-better-understand-your-emotions>

## Reflection

Going back to that something you did that you regret, what emotions do you think you were experiencing at the time of the incident?

Was it hard for you to identify the emotions you had?



# Thoughts behind the emotions

Now we are going to dig deeper and go to the source of your actions—your thoughts.

Thoughts are not an event, but rather our *interpretation* of the event. We see or hear something, then we tell ourselves a story about it.

Here are some examples:

- We see our partner frown and we think, “*My partner is mad at me. I’m in trouble.*”
- Our wife says something we disagree with and we think, “*What she said about me is not right. I can’t let her think that way.*”
- Our husband leaves for work without thanking us for the chores we did, and we think, “*It doesn’t seem like he values and appreciates me like he should.*”
- Our partner criticizes our work and we think, “*They must think I’m \_\_\_\_\_ (stupid, lazy, incompetent).*”

## Reflection

What thought(s) did you have that may have led to the uncomfortable emotion(s) and the action you regret?

## Viewpoint

### Take off the armor

This Guidebook talks a lot about a person’s thoughts and emotions. As you can already see, it also asks you to reflect on yours. It’s totally natural if you feel a bit nervous about that. But if you are tempted to keep your guard up, we encourage you not to. Take off your armor for this Guidebook, because you don’t need it. In fact, it’s going to get in your way. The process of bringing buried thoughts and feelings out into the open, even if it is open just for you, is the only way a person heals and changes.

If it makes you feel better, there are no right or wrong answers to the questions you will find here. And no one is going to judge you on your answers, because no one is going to see them unless you choose to share it with someone. You’re doing this for you!



# Faith Perspective

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

—[2 Corinthians 10:5](#)

God gives those of us who trust and love him the ability to control our thoughts and emotions in a way that blesses us. He helps us do this by providing a measuring stick we can use to decide which thoughts and emotions are beneficial, and which ones are garbage.

To use this tool, we must first “capture”—or be aware of—our thoughts. Then, we must compare them to the lessons that Jesus taught in his ministry. When we hang on to the thoughts that are consistent with his teachings and discard the ones that are not, our emotions, which come from our thoughts, stay on track.

For example, self-centered thoughts or a desire to get revenge on those who have wronged us are not Christ-like, and they don't serve us well in the long run. On the other hand, treating people kindly and with respect, even though those people are not perfect, is like Jesus. When we act like Christ, our relationships benefit, our self-esteem grows, and we get more respect from others.

God wants you to have good relationships with others and feel at peace with yourself. He wants to teach you the thoughts and feelings that will lead to that life. All you need to do is to be aware of your thoughts and compare them to his.

## Reflection

What's an example of a destructive, hurtful thought you've had?

How can you capture that thought and make it obedient to Christ?

Why does adopting Christ's way of thinking help us lead a good life?



# Exercises

## Process strong emotional reactions

Over the next week, notice any time you become upset or angry, or have a conflict with someone. Practice noticing your emotions and thoughts during these incidents. The more you repeat this exercise the better—it'll help you spot patterns in your behavior, and, as you continue using this Guidebook, evaluate your progress in changing it. Use the template provided on the next page, or write down the following in a journal:

1. What happened?
2. What emotion(s) did you feel at the time?
3. What thought(s) created the emotion(s)?

Before you jump in, here are some more detailed instructions followed by two examples.

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Date                                       | Add the date so you can track your progress.  |
| 1. What happened?                          | Brief notes about the overall incident (so you can remember it later), but also what you did (behavior you'd like to change).   |
| 2. What emotion(s) did you feel?           | Anger, irritation, and frustration are common, but these are typically surface emotions with deeper and more personal emotions beneath them. Try to determine what those deeper emotions might have been, even if you weren't aware of them at the time (we usually aren't).  |
| 3. What thought(s) created the emotion(s)? | What story were you telling yourself about what had just happened? What did the situation <i>mean</i> to you? What does it <i>say</i> about you?<br><br>As a check, turn things around the other way and ask yourself if those thoughts would likely have created the emotions you identified in question #2. Again, you were probably not aware of these thoughts at the time of the incident. |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Date                                       | March 25   |
| 1. What happened?                          | Person cut me off in traffic. I blasted my horn, cursed at them from inside my car, and flipped them off.  |
| 2. What emotion(s) did you feel?           | Angry and irritated. Also worried and disrespected.  |
| 3. What thought(s) created the emotion(s)? | If I keep getting pushed back in traffic, I'm going to be late for work, which will make me look bad to my boss and co-workers.<br><br>This driver should show more respect for me and not cut me off. |



|  |  |
|--|--|
| Date                                       | March 27   |
| 1. What happened?                          | Partner complained that I don't help them enough. I got defensive, raised my voice, and complained that my partner doesn't appreciate me enough.   |
| 2. What emotion(s) did you feel?           | Like a victim of injustice. Disrespected, unappreciated, ashamed   |
| 3. What thought(s) created the emotion(s)? | My partner's criticism is unfair. They should appreciate me more.<br>I know I don't do my part, but I need some down time.<br>Maybe I'm not a very good partner and I just don't measure up. |

Now, it's your turn. Here are a couple of blank templates to work with.

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Date                                       |  |
| 1. What happened?                          |  |
| 2. What emotion(s) did you feel?           |  |
| 3. What thought(s) created the emotion(s)? |  |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Date                                       |  |
| 1. What happened?                          |  |
| 2. What emotion(s) did you feel?           |  |
| 3. What thought(s) created the emotion(s)? |  |



# Guidepost



At the end of each session in this Guidebook, you'll find a list like this one. Think of it like a mental marker along your journey, but not the kind you only pass once. Let these points serve as a summary of the concepts we've covered and return to them whenever you need a refresh or a reminder.

- Change is possible, and so worth it. You are not alone: others have been where you are and have transformed their lives. You can, too.
- The first step—*recognizing* that something needs to change and *wanting* to change it—is one of the hardest. But here you are. You made that first step. Good for you!
- Remember that change isn't going to happen overnight. The journey is not going to be easy and it's going to require effort. We know you're up to it though! Life is all about these challenges.
- Don't freak out about all the questions and feelings that may be swirling around your head right now. The answers you need will come.
- Remember that our thoughts create our emotions, which in turn drive our actions. Awareness of our thoughts and emotions is key to changing behavior we don't like.





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**SESSION 2**

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Avalanche Escape Plan



# The BIG Idea

In the last session, we looked at the gap between where your life is today, and where you want it to be. In this session, we'll take a look at a key emotion that might be preventing you from closing that gap: rage. You'll start to learn where rage comes from, how to identify it when it's building, and most importantly, how to temporarily step away from situations when it's threatening to take over. By the end of this session, you will have gained a valuable tool for your journey toward healthier, more loving relationships.

## What is rage?

Rage is a state of mind where we are so angry, we can't think straight. Then, we end up doing something we shouldn't and regret it later. Sound familiar?

When rage happens, the rational parts of our brain literally stop working. Instead, the "lizard brain"—our primitive brain—takes over. This leaves a very limited set of possible reactions: usually, we either fight or flee.

This reflex-type reaction is useful if there is a real life-or-death threat, like a charging bear. But most situations with our partners don't justify a reaction that strong or immediate. We'd be much better off if we could *think* about the outcome we wanted and how we could respond to get that better outcome. As you probably know from experience, flying off the handle is seldom the best response. But how can we switch the thinking part of our brain back on, so we can choose something different?

### Reflection

With these questions, remember there are no right or wrong answers, and no one is judging you. These are just to help you to understand where you are today. Circle or highlight the answers that best apply to you.

When I feel angry, I am *most* likely to:

- Walk away
- Engage in an argument
- Walk away but then go back and argue
- Argue for a while but then walk away
- Discuss the issue calmly



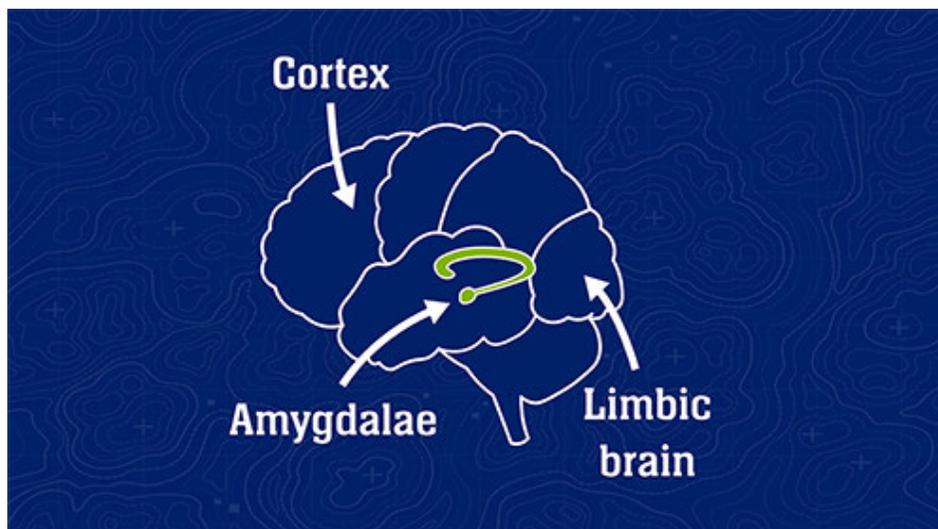
I experience rage...

- Never
- Once or twice a year
- Once or twice a month
- Once or twice a week
- Once or twice a day

## Brain anatomy

To understand what goes on inside our brain when we become enraged, it will help to learn a little about brain anatomy. Don't panic—this isn't a neuroscience lecture! It's just useful to have some basic knowledge.

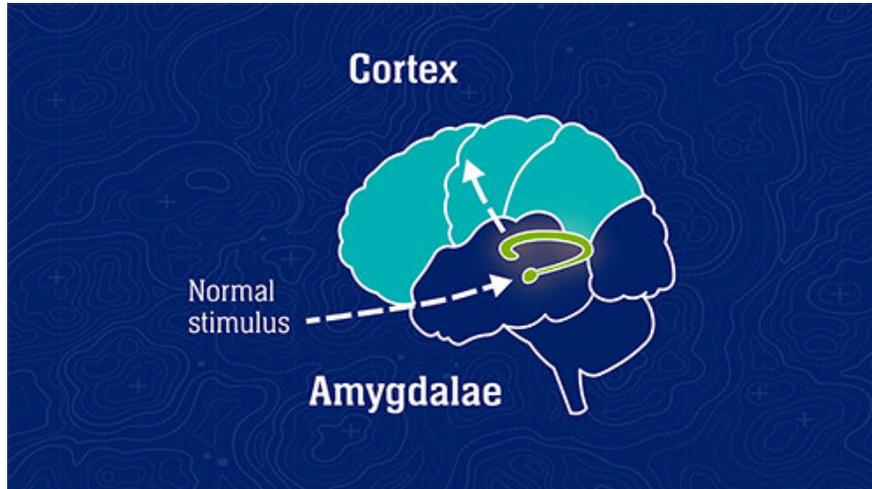
Rage reactions start from the amygdalae (“uh-mig-duh-lee”), two almond-shaped structures at the base of the brain, near the top of the spinal cord.



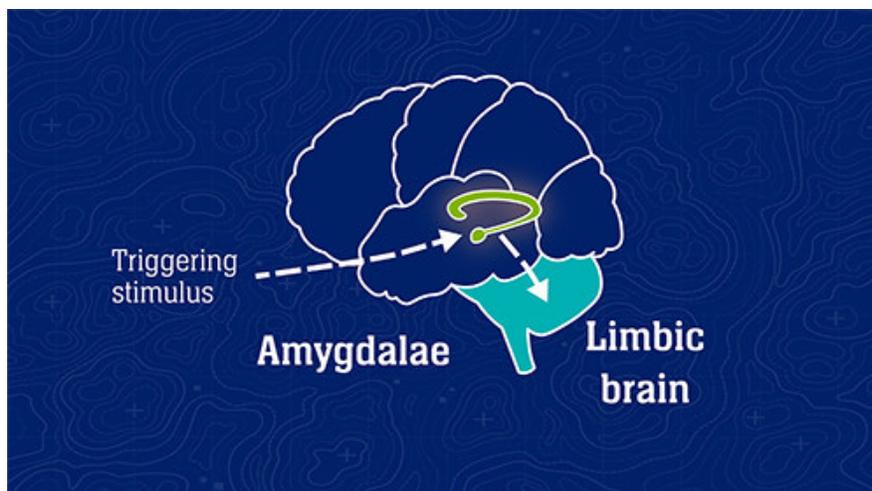
The amygdalae are a warehouse for memories that have strong emotions attached to them. They also serve as a router for our nerve signals. Incoming data or stimuli from our surroundings pass through the amygdalae. The amygdalae then send that information on to either the limbic or cortex areas of the brain.

Rational thinking, logic, and judgment happen in the cortex: the lobes at the top and front of the brain. The cortex contains what we think of as “memory” (information we’ve learned) and is used in making decisions. This is the most highly evolved part of the brain and involves lots of neurons, which is why rational thinking takes time and energy.





On the other hand, the limbic region is not very highly evolved—it's the same part that jerks our hand away from a hot burner. When the amygdalae perceive any kind of threat, they send the information straight to the limbic region, which reacts almost instantly. In this way, the amygdalae play an important role in our ability to survive.



However, not all threats involve charging bears or hot stoves. Sometimes, incoming data such as someone yelling at us, or even an angry look on someone's face, can “look like” a threat to our amygdalae. Making matters worse, our minds sometimes misread a situation, seeing it as much bigger and scarier than it really is. This is *especially* true when that incoming data reminds us of a painful past event.

Just like it does with a “real” threat, the amygdalae will route this information to the limbic part of our brain. Unfortunately, the limbic region has a limited set of responses: fight or flee. We either fight the threat or get away from it, to protect ourselves from being hurt. This is why we sometimes over-react to things that don't necessarily merit a big response.

When our amygdalae see something threatening, we don't figure out the best way to respond, consider the consequences, or rationalize our actions. The cortex—the part of the brain that performs those functions—is not at the meeting! This phenomenon is called an amygdala hijack or “lizard brain,” because a lizard's brain is dominated by the limbic part and not capable of rational responses.



# Early warning signs

It may feel like you go from 0 to 100 with no warning at all. This makes sense, given how quickly the amygdalae and limbic region work together to protect us from threats. If asked to draw a diagram of their experience, many people draw something like this:



The stimulus is anything that sets us off, big or small—our partner criticizing us, or someone cutting us off in traffic.

Wouldn't it be great if we had some sort of warning that would tell us we're headed into dangerous territory? Being able to recognize that warning sign and apply the brakes early would make a big difference.

## Warnings from your body

We may not realize it in the moment, but our bodies do give us clues when our anger is building. Tuning in to these clues can help us move away from the slippery slope toward full-blown rage. Here are some of the physical signs that show we're starting off on that path:

- Knot in the stomach or chest
- Heart pounding
- Face feeling warm and flushed
- Faster, shallower breath
- Tight muscles
- Racing mind

These changes happen in our body because our brain is seeing a “threat” and starting to pump adrenaline into our blood stream. Adrenaline is a hormone that gives us super powers when it matters most: allowing us to do things like lift up a car to save a child trapped underneath. It also speeds our heart and breathing rate, and sharpens our mind and senses—readying us for fight or flight.



## Warnings from your actions

Before we get to full-blown rage, our actions may also warn us we are headed out of control. There is usually a progression of actions that lead up to a physical fight or screaming match with our partner. Noticing these actions early, and then changing course while we still have some of our rational thinking, helps us avoid becoming enraged. Here are some signs that we're on a path toward rage:

- Saying something hurtful, critical, or sarcastic
- Raising our voice or yelling
- Becoming physically animated or tense, perhaps jumping out of a chair, pacing back and forth, or leaving the room only to return with something else to say
- Physical reactions such as pounding our fist on the table, slamming a door, throwing something, kicking a chair, or punching a wall

## Slow Motion Replay

What are the physical sensations and the actions *you* experience that can serve as your warning signs? If you're having trouble recognizing them, using a method we call the Slow-Motion Replay can give you more insight.

The Slow-Motion Replay simply means replaying past incidents from your memory, in slow motion. It works because we are away from the conflict—so we're calmer and more able to use the thinking parts of our brain. Much like watching a sports replay in slow motion, it's easier to see how events unfolded than in the moment. An example of a rage reaction might look like this (yours may be different):



Notice the intermediate steps between the stimulus and the rage reaction? These are warning signs. The key is to look for how *your* body usually reacts, or patterns that you see in *your* actions when your anger is building.



## Reflection

Replay in your mind some of those times when you felt really angry. Now think about how your body felt in those moments. What physical signs do you typically have?

Now focus on the things you did *after* you started getting angry but *before* you completely lost control. Do you see a pattern of *actions* in those moments? What are they?

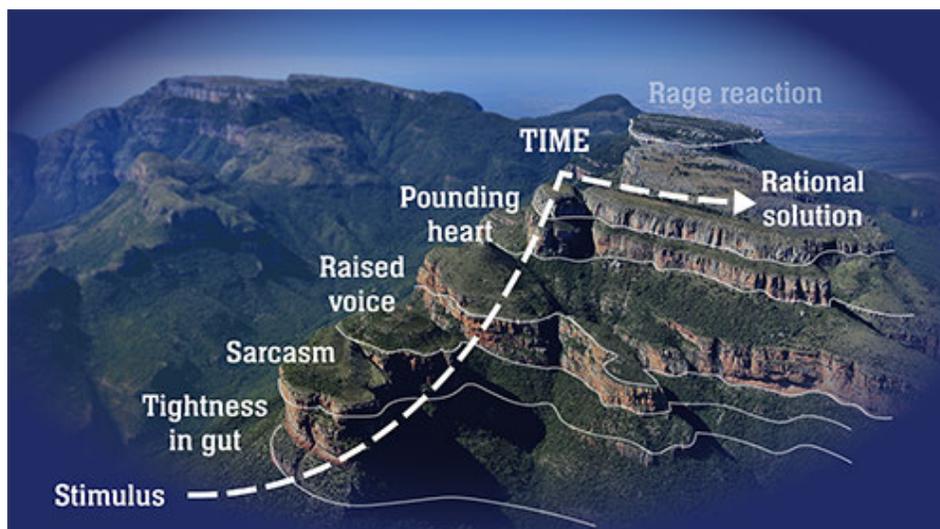
## The value of time

Knowing your warning signs is nice, but so what? How do we go from noticing them, to applying the brakes and avoiding a rage reaction?

See if you can remember a time when you *started* on the path toward rage, but didn't go all the way. Maybe something interrupted the process, like a phone call or a knock on the door. Once you'd dealt with the interruption you just didn't feel quite so angry, so the conflict stopped escalating.

The key to de-escalation isn't the phone call or knock on the door—it's *time*. A little bit of time allows our adrenaline to burn off, our emotions to quiet down, and our rational brain to kick into gear. This means we are able to respond to the situation in a better, more clear-minded way.

If you see a warning sign, insert time to avoid full-scale rage. Try doing this, and your rage diagram could look like:



This is a good start. As you continue to recognize warning signs earlier in the cycle, and before too much adrenaline is dumped into the bloodstream, it gets even easier to slow the process down and keep your rational brain functioning. By catching reactions sooner, you could make your rage diagram look like this:



or even this:



Remember, adding time into your emotional reaction pathway is a really good way to avoid rage.



## Reflection

Diagram what your rage reactions look like, including some of the warning signs you identified earlier.

Now diagram what your rage reactions might look like with time inserted after a warning sign that you could recognize. End your reaction diagram with a rational solution.

What regrettable actions could you eliminate by inserting time?

“Negative emotions like hatred destroy our peace of mind.”

—Matthieu Ricard



# Time-out plan

One sure way to insert time when you feel anger building is to take a “time-out” using the technique below. A time-out will slow things down and delay your reactions. This gives the thinking part of your brain a chance to engage and determine the best response, rather than letting the more primitive part hijack your thoughts and leave you with a limited, fight-or-flight reaction. Time-outs also allow the adrenaline to burn off, which helps you think more clearly.

All the steps in this technique are important and included in the list for a reason. Skipping one or several of the steps can cause a time-out to not work, or not work as well as it should. Several of them will help your partner *allow* you to take a time-out successfully. Here are the guidelines:

1. **Make a time-out plan and discuss it with your partner now**, before you need to use it. It will probably reassure them that you are thinking about strategies to keep them safe and reduce the ugliness of your disagreements. Plus, they'll understand what you are doing when you call “time-out” in an argument.
2. **Identify your own signs that you are becoming angry in advance**. Write them down. Study them. Be prepared to take a time-out next time you start noticing these warning signs.
3. **At the first sign of anger, tell your partner you are going to take a time-out**. Taking a time-out is not the same as giving in or being weak. On the contrary, it's a sign of tremendous strength and self-control.
4. **Focus on your own emotions**. When you call a time-out, focus on your own emotions and not your partner's actions. Say something like “I'm feeling angry and I'm going to take a time-out” rather than “You're pissing me off. I'm outta here!” or “You're being unreasonable and I'm not going to listen to this anymore.”
5. **Tell your partner where you are going**. Decide this ahead of time (see below). By telling your partner, he or she is less likely to worry about your safety or feel abandoned.
6. **Tell your partner how long you'll be gone**. Take a minimum of 45-60 minutes. Adrenaline will be burning off and the lizard brain may still be engaged for the first 30 minutes of a time-out. Once the hormones and emotions drain away, you will need more time to plan how to best handle the issue when you return. If your temptation is to take a time-out that lasts days, however, you are likely avoiding the situation. This is called stonewalling, and it also damages relationships.
7. **Tell your partner you would like to hear his or her point of view, and that the two you can discuss it when you return** (or at some set time). This lets them know that you value them and their opinion, and you're willing to discuss the issue and not just avoid it. Follow through on this promise.
8. **Leave in a respectful way**. Your last impression as you step out the door will help set expectations for your return. Make them positive by going quietly and under control.
9. **Return when you said you would, or call ahead** if you decide you need more time to cool off. This shows you are dependable – a quality that is very important to building and maintaining trust in a relationship.



## What to do (and not do) with your body

| DO   | DO NOT  |
|--|---|
| Something physical. Physical activity helps burn off excess energy and adrenaline that has built up in your bloodstream. Walking is an ideal activity because you can usually do it anytime, anywhere. | Go to a bar, consume alcohol, or do drugs. Mind-altering substances will most likely make the situation worse. They definitely will not help you think clearly. |
| Plan to be alone during this time. Give yourself time and space to think.  | Drive. Adrenaline and driving may be a worse combination than drinking and driving.   |

## What to do (and not do) with your mind

| DO  | DO NOT   |
|---|--|
| Remind yourself of what you like/love about your partner.   | Focus on your partner's flaws.   |
| Think compassionately about your partner's situation. Try to see their perspective on this issue.   | Just focus on your perspective or what you want.   |
| Use the time to plan how to best respond. What goals do you have for the conversation when you return? What outcome do you <i>really</i> want (close, loving partnership)?<br><br>What strategy is most likely to achieve that desired outcome? Plan the words you can say and the actions you can take to reach your goal with your partner. | Try to win the argument or protect your pride. That's not really a win.  |
| Call a mentor that is helping you on this journey, if you have one.   | Call your friend or parents for support. That will waste time and won't help you see your partner's perspective. Plus, many people give bad relationship advice. |

Consider writing your return plan down. Writing will help you see if your response is likely to lead you and your partner to a mutual understanding and a win-win solution, or whether it might just inflame the situation. Your notes can also help you verbalize it when you talk with your partner.



## Reflection

Do you believe that creating a time-out plan will help you avoid the big, damaging blow-ups?

Can you envision yourself calling time-out and following your plan?

If you answered no to either of the above questions, why not?

“Emotional self-control is the result of hard work,  
not an inherent skill.”

—Travis Bradberry



# Viewpoint

## Substance abuse

Alcohol or drugs do not *cause* domestic violence. If they did, everyone who drank or used would commit violence against his or her partner. Clearly that's not the case. However, there is a strong link between substance abuse and domestic violence, and some important lessons to be learned. Consider the following:

- Abusing substances like alcohol and drugs can be a major source of conflict in a relationship. Since most domestic violence occurs during conflict, it's easy to see how one can help create the conditions for (but not cause) the other.
- Intoxication *facilitates* violence. Alcohol and other drugs have the effect of impairing judgment and lowering inhibitions. People who are drunk or high do a lot of things they wouldn't do sober. It's not unusual to see people "under the influence" become hostile and aggressive, so it's no surprise that they might argue with and even strike their partner.
- Domestic violence and substance abuse often have the same root cause, like how a fever and vomiting are both symptoms of the flu. This root cause is usually some sort of emotional hurt from past traumas, especially those from our childhood. Some of these traumas include physical or emotional abuse, abandonment, or having a controlling parent.
- In the case of substance abuse, we are usually trying to numb the hurt. In the case of abusive behavior, we are trying to stop or control someone who is reminding us of the hurt in some way (more on this later). However, trying to stop hurt we are experiencing in our current circumstances by controlling others that we think are responsible for it. Neither strategy works. The effects of our misguided efforts only make matters worse.

"I was drunk" or "I was high" is not an excuse for committing an act of domestic violence. Just like with drunk driving, being under the influence can contribute to us doing harm, but we are still responsible. That responsibility started before we reached a state of being drunk or high.

Given the strong association between substance abuse and domestic violence, avoiding alcohol and drugs should be at the top of the to-do list if you want to stop hurting the one you love. If you are having trouble stopping, get help from counseling, a treatment center, or a group like AA, NA, or Celebrate Recovery.



# Faith Perspective

Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires.

—[James 1:19-20](#)

Sometimes God's word comforts us; sometimes it challenges us. When you read the passage above, ask yourself how you measure up to this guidance for receiving the good life. Are you quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger? Or are you more in the slow to listen, quick to speak, and quick to anger camp? If it is the second one, it is hurting your relationships *and you*.

This is called "being convicted" by God's word. It doesn't lead to punishment, however. It should lead to focus and motivation, if we let it. Like any good coaching, it helps us zero in on our weaknesses so we can make corrections and get better results.

God loves us too much to leave us where we are. When we follow his guidance, the way in which others see us, the quality of our relationships, and most importantly, the way we feel about *ourselves* all improve. We start "living right," which is another way of saying we get closer to the righteous life that God desires for us.

Don't be afraid of being convicted by God. As creator of all things, he knows how things, like relationships, work best. As someone who loves you, he's always giving guidance that is helpful. And, it's always done gently and loaded with grace, so you can begin living a more righteous life.

## Reflection

Would you say that you are more quick to listen, or quick to anger?

What have you felt convicted of (guilty about) in the past? What did you do about it?

How is it helpful to have God's word as a measuring stick?



# Exercises

## Process strong emotional reactions

Continue the exercise from Session 1, taking notes about any incident in which you become upset or angry, or have a conflict with someone:

- 1. What happened?
- 2. What emotion(s) did you feel at the time?
- 3. What thought(s) created the emotion(s)?

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Date                                       |  |
| 1. What happened?                          |  |
| 2. What emotion(s) did you feel?           |  |
| 3. What thought(s) created the emotion(s)? |  |

Copy this form and repeat this exercise as many times as you need to. Consider processing incidents that happened weeks, months, or even years ago by asking yourself and answering these same questions. The more different situations and the more often you practice this technique, the faster and more completely your change will happen.



## Create and practice your time-out plan

Think through, write down, and practice your time-out plan.

- What are you going to do during a time-out?
- Where are you going to go?
- How long will you be gone?

Then, tell your partner about your plan and its purpose. If possible, practice your time-out plan during the week, even if you don't need it. If you can't do that, try to visualize yourself doing it.

### My time-out plan

Signs that I am becoming angry that I want to notice:

I'm going to tell my partner that I'm going to take a time-out by saying (hint: focus on your own emotions, e.g. "I'm feeling \_\_\_\_\_" or "I need to cool down"):

During a time-out, I'm going to (do) \_\_\_\_\_ and go to \_\_\_\_\_.

During a time-out, I'm going to be gone for (take a minimum of 45-60 minutes): \_\_\_\_\_.

I'm going to tell my partner that I would like to hear his or her point of view by saying:

I'm going to leave in a respectful way by doing the following:

I'm going to return when I said I would, or call if I need more time to cool off.

I've discussed this time-out plan with my partner before I need to use it.



# Guidepost



- Our amygdalae are like a router in our brain, sending information from the outside world to either the cortex (the rational, thinking part) or the limbic brain (the irrational, reactionary part).
- When we perceive something potentially threatening, our amygdalae send it to our limbic brain and our brain starts pumping adrenaline into our bloodstream. This primes us for a strong fight-or-flight reaction and can lead to rage.
- Although rage may seem to happen in the blink of an eye, there are warning signs—especially in our bodies, words, and actions. Take time to figure out what those warning signs are for you so you can recognize when you're starting to get enraged.
- Inserting *time* before we get to full-blown rage is an effective way to avoid behavior we'll regret, because it gives a chance for adrenaline to leave our bloodstream and our rational brain to engage.
- Insert time by taking a “time-out,” following the guidelines in this chapter. Make sure you stick to a time-out plan that you and your partner have agreed upon ahead of time.





ANANIAS  
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**SESSION 3**

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Identifying Avalanche Danger

# The BIG Idea

When we're hiking in the mountains, it's great to have an escape plan in case we get caught in an avalanche. However, it would be far safer to avoid being in those high-risk areas to begin with. The same goes for rage. Avoiding when it is coming at us is critical, but it is far better not to get into those worst-case scenarios to begin with. Letting our anger build to the brink of rage and then hoping we'll be able to make a last-minute escape is a risky strategy. Plus, it will not give us the healthy relationships and inner peace in life we want.

In the next three sessions, we are going to get to the source of those strong reactions and work toward stopping them before they get started. At the very least, we want to make them small enough for you to manage. Our work here will help you reduce both how *often* you feel upset, and how *strong* those upsetting emotions are.

We'll start in this session by finding your "buttons"—the things that set your strong reactions into motion. Then, in Session 4, we'll introduce you to a technique for "disconnecting" buttons. In Session 5, we'll go deeper into the source of those buttons, which puts us on a path for permanent change.

## Introducing buttons

### Button basics

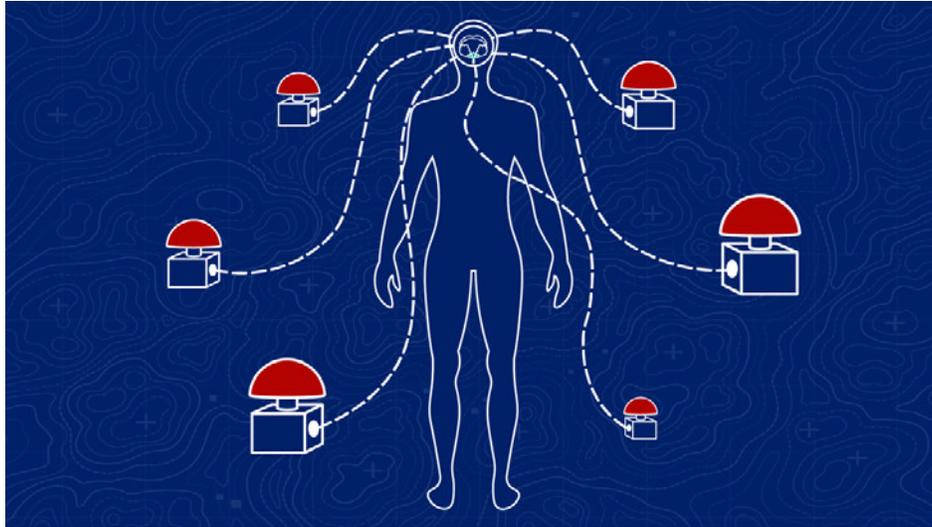
A "button" is an emotionally sensitive spot. When pressed, a button can set off a strong reaction, or even a rage reaction, inside of us.

"Button" is a handy term. We can talk about *who* or *what* pushed our button, and therefore started our reaction. We can identify *which* button was pushed, as we all have more than one issue that we are sensitive about. We can even consider *how big* a particular button is. Some are easier to hit and cause stronger reactions—meaning we are more sensitive to that issue.

Here's a comparison that might help the button concept make sense. If someone pats you on your shoulder, it's ordinarily no big deal, right? However, if you just dislocated your shoulder, that pat may cause extreme pain. In this scenario, you'd say your shoulder is "sensitive." As it heals, it will gradually get less sensitive. Once it's healed completely, it won't hurt at all.

A similar painful reaction happens when someone or something touches our emotionally sensitive spots. The good news is, they work in a similar way to a dislocated shoulder. We can heal those spots so that they hurt less, or even stop hurting completely. We'll go into that in the next two sessions.





## Common buttons

While this is by no means a complete list, here are some of the buttons people often discover they have:

- Feeling left out or ignored
- Not being listened to
- Not feeling respected
- Not feeling appreciated
- Looking bad to others
- Feeling like a failure
- Not having a say or control over what's happening

## Who owns our buttons?

Before we go further, the question of ownership is an important one to answer. Yes—we just admitted that other people can (and do) push our buttons. However, those buttons are still ours, not anyone else's.

We are responsible for our buttons being there. Others are not responsible for avoiding them. For the most part, they're not trying to push our buttons—they're probably just accidentally bumping into them. Even if someone *is* intentionally pushing our buttons, we're the ones who have them there to be pushed in the first place. If we get rid of our buttons, other people can't push them.

This idea of "owning our buttons" might seem like it is letting the button-pushers in our lives off easily. However, it is actually very empowering. Rather than having to convince others not to push our buttons (something that is never easy to do and can lead us to harmful behavior when we try), we can focus on something we *can* control—disconnecting those buttons.



## Reflection

Now that you've been introduced to the concept of buttons, what are some of yours? In other words, what are some of the things that really bug you? What are the things that you tend to react strongly to?

How do you typically respond when one of your buttons gets pushed? For example, do you withdraw, push back, etc.?

## Discovering buttons through journaling

Were you able to identify at least one of your buttons? Often, we're not even aware of our buttons until we start looking closely for them. A great way to do this is through a technique called journaling. Journaling is simply making a record of incidents when you had a strong reaction, then looking for the patterns.

If you've completed the last two sessions' assignments, then you already have a start on this technique. We're going to build on this now to get a few more insights and identify a few more buttons. Later, we'll add another step to your journaling process to help you start disconnecting those emotional hot buttons.

“We cannot always control everything that happens to us in this life, but we can control how we respond.”

—L. Lionel Kendrick



## Reflection

So far, you've been answering the following questions:

1. What happened?
2. What emotion(s) did you feel at the time?
3. What thoughts did you have that might have created that emotion?

Now, let's add two more questions. Look back at one of the incidents you recorded from last week and answer these:

On a scale of 1-10, how big of deal was this situation? (1=not a big deal at all, 10=huge deal)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

On a scale of 1-10, how big was your reaction? (1=no reaction at all, 10=huge reaction)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

## Looking for patterns

After journaling about a few incidents, you may notice a pattern that your reactions are almost always bigger than the situation called for. That's a good indication there's a button that's setting off the bigger-than-needed reaction.

See if you can identify any other patterns. Did any of the incidents have something in common? For example, if several of the situations were about money, spending time together, or feeling embarrassed, then those are probably buttons for you. Did you often feel the same emotions? Did similar thoughts create those emotions?

If you want even more practice (and insights), consider journaling about things that happened last week, last month, or last year. Any incidents where you remember having a big reaction are good material. Use your memory to the best of your ability to answer the journaling questions. There's an exercise at the end of this session just for that purpose.



## Reflection

Generally speaking, are your reactions smaller, bigger, or about the same size as what the situation calls for?

What do the situations, emotions, and thoughts that lead to your biggest reactions seem to have in common?

## Learning from our buttons

Discovering our buttons is a first step into understanding what's going on in our mind when we behave in harmful or controlling ways. With that insight, we can then adjust our thoughts so that they create smaller, more manageable emotions. Once that happens, we will feel less pressure to react to difficult situations, and have more mental space to think through how we can best respond to them.

Once we've discovered a button, the key is to ask ourselves a couple of questions:

- "Why does this bother me so much?" and
- "How can I think about this differently so it doesn't bother me so much?"

Note, these are very different questions than:

- "Why does that person keep pressing my button?" or
- "How can I get them to stop?"

As a reminder, since we own our buttons, we also have the power (and responsibility) to determine what, if anything, those buttons do. In other words, we can determine how we think and feel about different circumstances. Remember that when we take control of our buttons, we are taking control of how we feel. Why would we want to give that power to anyone else?

"For me, writing is a way of thinking... writing and meditation allow me to slow down and watch my mind."

—Ruth Ozeki



# How others see it

Sometimes it can be difficult to see ourselves thinking or feeling any other way than how we usually think or feel. For example, we might think, “If someone yells at me, of course I’m going to feel disrespected and get upset!”

One way to break out of that pattern is to consider if those same circumstances bother everyone as much as they do us. Usually, we can think of someone that isn’t as sensitive to a particular situation. Adopting that person’s mindset gives us a useful strategy for thinking differently about the situations that tend to press our buttons.

For example, imagine a good customer service representative and how they handle angry customers. How do they think differently so having someone yell at them doesn’t bother them as much? They might think: “Wow, this guy is not having a good day.” This is much less personal than “Ugh, this guy is being so disrespectful to me!” Hopefully you can see how thinking about the situation in a less personal way leads to a much smaller and more easy-to-handle emotion.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life.”

—[Psalm 139:23-24](#)



# Viewpoint

## Stress

Stress has a way of bringing out the worst in us. Mix in factors that lower our resistance, like being tired, hungry, or both, and it's a recipe for disaster.

That said, stress is never an excuse for violence. We will always have stress in our lives: sometimes more, sometimes less, but never none.

Does stress make people who are prone to causing harm more likely to cause harm? Without a doubt. Our job is to do whatever we have to do to manage our actions and reactions, regardless of the amount of stress we're under. Our worst can be "grumpy" or "irritable," but it can never be violent or abusive.

Of course, reducing stress is always a good idea. It provides benefits to both our health and quality of life. If you're at the beginning of your journey from violent to non-violent, lowering stress levels will take a little of the pressure off while you practice emotional control techniques, discover the root causes of your reactions, and learn new ways of responding.

What steps you can take to manage your stress during this journey? Can you reduce your hours at work? See a financial advisor about your money worries? Get a family member to help out with childcare?

At some point, however, there's only so much we can control. Focusing on eliminating stress instead of improving our emotional management is a dangerous strategy. Stress is a compounding factor, but not the cause of domestic violence. Prioritize gaining control over your reactions, not on reducing your stress.

“For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.”

—[2 Timothy 1:7](#)



# Faith Perspective

Throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception. Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy.

—[Ephesians 4:22-24](#)

The word “sin” often gets defined as a wicked or immoral act. But God sees sin as *any* way in which we fall short of what we were created to be. And the reality is, *all* of us fall short of our potential to be the kind of people God had in mind when he made us. In other words, all of us sin.

Sometimes we do things that hurt others, and in the process, hurt us, too. Other times, we miss opportunities sent to bless us. There are countless ways in which we sin and stop ourselves from experiencing our best lives.

The good news is, we can change. We don’t have to be stuck with old patterns of behavior that come up short. How does that change happen? By letting the Holy Spirit renew our thoughts. It is our thoughts that determine how we feel about our circumstances and the people around us. God wants us to see things like he sees them, and think about them in the way that he thinks about them.

The Holy Spirit is how God shows us his perspective. It comes to us in the form of better thoughts that enter our minds to replace toxic thoughts that aren’t working for us. It comes as “ah-ha” moments when we are reading the Bible or listening to a pastor’s teachings.

We can create these transformative moments simply by asking God to show us a better way to think and act, listening for his voice in our minds, and then following his guidance when he speaks.

## Reflection

In what ways do you feel you’ve fallen short of being the person God created you to be?

What is an example of something, or someone, that God might see differently than you do?

What’s one “ah-ha” moment you’ve had while reading the Bible or listening to Biblical teaching?



# Exercises

## Process strong emotional reactions

Continue answering the three questions from the previous sessions, any time you become upset, angry, or have a conflict with anyone. Plus, answer these additional questions:

4. On a scale of 1-10, how big of a deal was the situation?
5. On a scale of 1-10, how big was your reaction?
6. Why did this particular situation bother you so much?
7. How else could you think about this situation so it wouldn't be such a big deal?

Here are some more detailed instructions, followed by an example and a template for you to use.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Date  | Add the date so you can track your progress.  |
| 1. What happened?   | Brief notes about the overall incident (so you can remember it later), but also what you did (behavior you'd like to change).   |
| 2. What emotion(s) did you feel?  | Anger, irritation, and frustration are common, but these are typically surface emotions with deeper and more personal emotions beneath them. Try to determine what those deeper emotions might have been, even if you weren't aware of them at the time (we usually aren't).  |
| 3. What thought(s) created the emotion(s)?                              | What story were you telling yourself about what had just happened? What did the situation <i>mean</i> to you? What does it <i>say</i> about you?<br><br>For example, if your partner criticizes you, do you tell yourself a story that the criticism is just more evidence that you don't measure up? If someone cuts you off in traffic, do you tell yourself the story that their disrespectful act means you don't deserve to be treated with respect?                         |
| 4. How big of deal was this?  | After stepping back from the situation, how big of a deal was it? How big of a deal will you say it was a year from now? Circle the corresponding number.   |
| 5. How big was your reaction?   | Again, circle the number. Look for situations where your reaction is bigger than the situation called for (#4).   |
| 6. Why did this bother you so much?                                     | The emphasis in this question is on <i>you</i> . Consider that a similar situation might not have bothered others as much as it did you (likely it would not have).<br><br>What parts of the story you're telling yourself (question #3) are untrue, distorted, or illogical? Are you interpreting this situation too personally?   |
| 7. How else could you think about it so it wouldn't be such a big deal? | What different story can you tell yourself that would lead to a less powerful emotion and, likely, a less harmful reaction?<br><br>For example, consider what might have been going on with the other person (upset, hurried, stressed) to help you see their behavior as about them, not you. Detach negative thoughts you have about <i>your actions</i> from negative thoughts you have about <i>you</i> . For example, don't make "I made a mistake" into "I'm a bad person". |



|   |   |
|---|---|
| Date  | March 27  |
| 1. What happened?   | Partner complained that I don't help them enough. I got defensive, raised my voice, and complained that my partner doesn't appreciate me enough.  |
| 2. What emotion(s) did you feel?  | Like a victim of injustice. Disrespected, unappreciated, ashamed.   |
| 3. What thought(s) created the emotion(s)?                              | My partner's criticism is unfair. They should appreciate me more.<br>I know I don't do my part, but I need some down time.<br>Maybe I'm not a very good partner and I just don't measure up.  |
| 4. How big of deal was this?  | 1 2 <b>3</b> 4 5 6 7 8 9 10   |
| 5. How big was your reaction?   | 1 2 3 4 5 <b>6</b> 7 8 9 10   |
| 6. Why did this bother you so much?                                     | I think of myself as someone who pulls their weight. If my partner disagrees, either they're right and I'm lazy/a bad person, or they're wrong and they don't see my contributions. If they loved me, they would appreciate me.   |
| 7. How else could you think about it so it wouldn't be such a big deal? | If I'm not helping enough, that doesn't make me a bad person. It's an opportunity for me to improve and be a better partner.<br>If it's not true, and my partner just isn't seeing my contributions, I should forgive them—they're very stressed. It doesn't mean they don't love me. |

|   |                      |
|---|----------------------|
| Date  |                      |
| 1. What happened?   |                      |
| 2. What emotion(s) did you feel?  |                      |
| 3. What thought(s) created the emotion(s)?                              |                      |
| 4. How big of deal was this?  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 5. How big was your reaction?   | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 6. Why did this bother you so much?                                     |                      |
| 7. How else could you think about it so it wouldn't be such a big deal? |                      |



|   |                      |
|---|----------------------|
| Date  |                      |
| 1. What happened?   |                      |
| 2. What emotion(s) did you feel?  |                      |
| 3. What thought(s) created the emotion(s)?                              |                      |
| 4. How big of deal was this?  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 5. How big was your reaction?   | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 6. Why did this bother you so much?                                     |                      |
| 7. How else could you think about it so it wouldn't be such a big deal? |                      |

|   |                      |
|---|----------------------|
| Date  |                      |
| 1. What happened?   |                      |
| 2. What emotion(s) did you feel?  |                      |
| 3. What thought(s) created the emotion(s)?                              |                      |
| 4. How big of deal was this?  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 5. How big was your reaction?   | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 6. Why did this bother you so much?                                     |                      |
| 7. How else could you think about it so it wouldn't be such a big deal? |                      |



## Look for patterns

Look through your answers from this session and the previous two sessions, and answer these questions:

1. What do the situations that triggered your big reactions have in common?
  
2. If you were going to label your buttons, what would those labels be? For example, you might have a “No one is listening to me” button or a “This makes me feel stupid” button.

## Practice your time-out plan

Continue to practice your time-out plan. Has it been working for you? Refine it if necessary. Look especially at how you are thinking on your time-out. Are you focused on how hurt you feel and ruminating over what your partner did wrong? Or, are you setting goals for the conversation you'll have when you return and forming a strategy for that discussion that results in a win-win for both you and your partner?



# Guidepost



- “Buttons” are our emotionally sensitive spots. When they get pushed, they bring strong reactions out of us. Everyone has different buttons and different levels of sensitivity to certain situations.
- Whether other people push our buttons on purpose or not, *our* buttons are *our* responsibility. Owning our buttons is empowering. Making them someone else’s responsibility is giving away our power.
- We can identify our buttons by writing down the situations that led to big reactions, and seeing what they have in common.
- Imagining how somebody else might respond to a situation can be a useful way to change our thinking. The good customer service representative tells themselves: “this person is having a bad day,” not “this person is disrespecting me.”





ANANIAS  
FOUNDATION

**SESSION 4**

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Seeing the Trail Clearly

# The BIG Idea

In this session, we'll look at how to disconnect buttons, or at least reduce their power. We do this by identifying and challenging something called distorted thinking. We'll also look at a way to speed up your change process by practicing thinking different thoughts and envisioning different responses to potentially challenging situations. Let's keep going!

## Distorted thinking

When our mind convinces us of something that really isn't true, it's called distorted thinking. These inaccurate thoughts often generate powerful negative emotions by telling us things that *sound* rational and accurate, but that only serve to keep us feeling upset or bad about ourselves.

Imagine you are wearing an augmented reality headset that's showing you images that are far more threatening than what is actually surrounding you. Your neighbor's cat walks into view, but what you see in your AR glasses is a saber-tooth tiger. A gentle breeze moves the curtains nearby, but what you see is a hurricane ripping off roofs and uprooting trees.

That's what happens when we allow distorted thinking to creep in. We see things as awful and threatening and feel compelled to change the situation. However, when we see situations more accurately, we're more likely to respond with a smaller, more measured response or no response at all.

### How to neutralize distorted thinking

By learning to recognize distorted thinking, we can question it and prove it wrong. Once we see the distorted thought for what it really is, we no longer feel like we need to act on it as if it were true.

Everyone is guilty of distorted thinking at one time or another. The less we do it, however, the more likely we are to respond appropriately rather than with over-sized reactions. In other words, identifying distorted thinking, then challenging it, is the best way to reduce the number and size of our bad reactions and change our behavior.

“What we think, we become.”

—Buddha



# Identifying distorted thinking

## Absolute words

One of the first places to look for distorted thinking is checking our thoughts for “absolute words.” Absolute words create problems for us because they give us no flexibility to accommodate the real world and the flawed people around us. We expect perfection, and when we encounter a situation or person that goes against that (sooner or later they always do), we feel upset.

As you look through your thoughts behind behavior you are trying to change, see if those thoughts contain some of these absolute words:

- must
- should
- have to
- can't
- all
- always
- nobody
- never
- each
- every
- only
- total

Here are some examples of thoughts which use absolute words, each followed by a more balanced and less distorted thought:

- I **must be** on time for my appointment.
- It's good to be on time, but it won't be the end of the world if I'm late—these things happen.
- My kids **should** be respectful.
- I want my kids to be respectful, but it's normal for teens to sometimes be mouthy. I can remind them of the importance of respect or create consequences if their behavior persists.
- I **have to** know what my wife/girlfriend is saying about me to others.
- There's no way I am going to be able to know or control everything that everyone says about me. All I can do is act with integrity and trust that people will see my true character most of the time.
- I **can't** let him think that I don't know something.
- No one knows everything—we each have our different area of knowledge and experience. Asking questions or admitting I don't know something does not make me stupid.
- **All** my boss wants is for me to make him look good.
- My boss seems pretty focused on his career success, but I know that having our team perform well benefits us all.
- She **always** has to get her way.
- My wife can be pretty persuasive, but she also listens to my viewpoints when I express them calmly.
- There is **nobody** alive that would enjoy being around that woman.
- I believe many people find her annoying. Still, she seems to have friends so others must see her differently than I do.
- He **never** pays attention to me.
- Sometimes my husband gets really focused on his work, but once he stops and relaxes, he's good about paying attention to me.



- **Each** and **every** time I ask him to help, he ignores me.
- I am frustrated that he doesn't help me more when I ask, but he is very busy—and he does help in his own way.
- She **only** remembers the times I mess up and doesn't remember **anything** I do right.
- I don't like it when she drags up my past mistakes, but she also shows appreciation for me.
- This project is a **total** disaster.
- We've made some mistakes that we'll want to fix.

## More common types of distorted thinking

Distorted thoughts often follow familiar patterns. Here are some common categories of distorted thinking, along with some challenges to each thought. Note how the distorted thought is inflexible (doesn't make room for real life), illogical (doesn't actually make sense), or untrue:

| Distortion type   | Example  | Challenges to distortion   |
|---|--|--|
| <p><b>1. Filtering</b></p> <p>Negative details are magnified, while positive aspects of a situation are filtered out.</p>   | <p>"My husband forgot to buy the BBQ sauce I asked him to buy. He's so forgetful."</p>   | <p>Maintain a balance in your perspective: "He did get a whole bunch of other groceries for us. The sauce is not a big deal. I can go back and get some if we need more."</p>  |
| <p><b>2. Polarized or "black and white" thinking</b></p> <p>Things are either black or white, good or bad. People or situations fit into either/or categories with no middle ground.</p>  | <p>"My daughter's new boyfriend has a tattoo and wears his hair too long. I know he's no good."</p>  | <p>Most people and situations are complex. Allow for shades of gray: "I don't approve of his personal grooming, but he is friendly, makes my daughter laugh, and gets her home on time."</p>   |
| <p><b>3. Overgeneralization</b></p> <p>Coming to a general conclusion based on one incident or a single piece of evidence.</p>  | <p>"I stopped at that new parts store down the street. I waited 15 minutes and never got help. Their service is lousy and I'm never going back there again."</p> | <p>One experience may not be the case all the time: "Maybe they were short on help and still training employees. I'll give them another chance after they have more time to get established."</p>  |
| <p><b>4. Jumping to conclusions</b></p> <p>We assume we know what others are feeling and why they act the way they do. In particular, we assume we know how people are feeling about us and the motivation for their actions toward us.</p> | <p>"I asked my girlfriend out to dinner but she said she has other plans. She doesn't like me and doesn't want to be with me."</p>                               | <p>Reading someone else's mind is not possible and can needlessly take us down a very negative path: "She usually says yes when I ask her out. Maybe she wanted to go but really does have other plans. I could ask her for another night, or ask her if everything is okay between us."</p> |



|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <p><b>5. Catastrophizing</b></p> <p>Expecting disaster to strike, no matter what. We act like “what if” scenarios are certain.</p>   | <p>“My wife wasn’t ready for the company picnic when I asked her to be, so we’re going to be late. I’m going to look like a fool and I’ll never get the promotion I’ve been working for.”</p> | <p>Things seldom turn into a worst-case scenario: “Ten minutes late is no big deal. This won’t reflect on my work or stop me from getting promoted.”</p>   |
| <p><b>6. Personalization</b></p> <p>A kind of distortion where we believe that everything others do or say is some kind of direct, personal attack—that it’s always about us.</p>  | <p>“That guy changed lanes right in front of me and cut me off. He has no respect for me and doesn’t care about my safety.”</p>   | <p>People are seldom even aware of us, much less doing things intentionally to us: “He must be in a hurry. Maybe he didn’t see me and it was an innocent mistake. In fact, I changed lanes last week and didn’t see the car in my blind spot until they honked their horn.”</p>  |
| <p><b>7. Control fallacy</b></p> <p>If we feel controlled by something external, we see ourselves as a helpless victim of fate. Or, in the fallacy of internal control, we try to take control of—and make ourselves responsible for—the pain and happiness of everyone around us.</p> | <p>(External) “I can’t help it if the quality of my work is poor. My boss gives me too much to do.”</p> <p>OR</p> <p>(Internal) “If my husband had a bad day, I have to make him happy.”</p>  | <p>Take responsibility for what you can control and let go of the things you can’t:</p> <p>“I’m going to spend a little more time checking for my mistakes.”</p> <p>OR</p> <p>“My husband had a bad day. I’ll try to cheer him up, but if he’s not ready for it, I’ll know I tried.”</p>   |
| <p><b>8. Fallacy of fairness</b></p> <p>Feeling resentful because we think the world and the people in it ought to be fair, when in fact they often aren’t. Or, thinking we know what fair is and isn’t, when others have different ideas.</p>   | <p>“It’s not fair that Bob got promoted before me. I’ve worked harder and contributed more than he did.”</p>  | <p>Things won’t always work out in our favor, even when we think they should. Expecting fairness will often leave us feeling upset: “No one said life was fair. Maybe Bob worked harder than I realized and this is a fair reward for him.”</p>  |
| <p><b>9. Blaming</b></p> <p>Holding other people responsible for our pain. Or, taking the other track and blaming ourselves for every problem. This is similar to the control fallacy.</p>   | <p>“I have a drinking problem because my addict parents messed me up!”</p> <p>OR</p> <p>“My girlfriend cheated because I was too needy.”</p>  | <p>Nobody can make us feel any particular way—ultimately, we get to choose how we feel:</p> <p>“My parents made mistakes, but I can heal and create a better life for myself.”</p> <p>OR</p> <p>“I could be more self-sufficient, but my girlfriend still made her own bad decision to cheat rather than work things out with me.”</p> |



|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <p><b>10. Shoulds</b></p> <p>These are ironclad rules about how people should (or should not) behave. Others who break the rules make us angry, while we feel guilty when we violate our own rules.</p>      | <p>“My neighbor should rake his leaves before they blow into my yard.”</p> <p>OR</p> <p>“I really should exercise.”</p>                        | <p>Remove the should and make the rule more optional:</p> <p>“It would be nice if my neighbor raked, but there’s no code that says he has to.”</p> <p>OR</p> <p>“Exercise would be a good choice for me.”</p>                          |
| <p><b>11. Emotional reasoning</b></p> <p>Believing that what we feel must automatically be true.</p>   | <p>“I feel stupid when I try to read about investments. I must be stupid.”</p>   | <p>Don’t assume that your emotions are really true. Try to rationalize: “Just because I feel stupid doesn’t make it true. In fact, there are many subjects where I feel pretty smart.”</p>   |
| <p><b>12. Fallacy of change</b></p> <p>The expectation that other people will change to suit our wishes if we just pressure them enough.</p>   | <p>“My boyfriend’s job requires him to work nights and weekends. He needs to quit or I’m never going to be happy.”</p>                         | <p>Don’t pin your hope for happiness on someone else’s behavior: “I don’t understand why my boyfriend likes his job, but I don’t have to work there so I guess it is his choice to make.”</p>  |
| <p><b>13. Global labeling/mislabeling</b></p> <p>Describing a person or event with highly colored and emotionally loaded language.</p>   | <p>“I’ve been down-sized from my job. I’m a total loser.”</p> <p>OR</p> <p>“I stayed out a bit late and my partner got upset—she’s crazy!”</p> | <p>Avoid labels. Stick with the facts: “I got down-sized from my job.”</p> <p>OR</p> <p>“My partner was upset with me for staying out late.”</p>   |
| <p><b>14. Always being right</b></p> <p>Feeling continually on trial to prove that our opinions and actions are correct. Being wrong is unthinkable. We go to any length to demonstrate we’re right.</p>     | <p>“I’m going to ask all my friends to back me up here, because I <i>know</i> I’m right and you’re wrong.”</p>                                 | <p>Be humble and recognize we don’t always get it right. Even if you are right, put harmony in your relationship first: “I think I’m right about this, but I’m going to let it go. There’s no upside to proving my partner wrong.”</p> |
| <p><b>15. Heaven’s reward fallacy</b></p> <p>Expecting our sacrifices and self-denial to be seen and rewarded, as if everyone else should be keeping score. We feel bitter when the reward doesn’t come.</p> | <p>“I work my butt off to support this family and no one ever thanks me.”</p>  | <p>Let the knowledge that you’re doing the right thing be the reward: “I work my butt off to support my family. I feel good about myself because I know it’s the right thing to do.”</p>   |



# Missed expectations

Another version of distorted thinking is missed expectations. This happens when we have false notions of how something should work or someone else should act. When something or someone doesn't live up to our expectations, we feel negative emotions like disappointment or sadness. It's tempting to try to get rid of these uncomfortable feelings by pressuring those around us to change so our expectations are met.

We may have missed expectations when our partner doesn't always...

- Agree with us or think the same way
- Do things the same way
- Have the same mood
- Have the same likes or desires
- Say the right thing
- Solve our problems
- Make us feel loved
- Make us happy

If you ever catch yourself thinking, "If they really loved me, they would \_\_\_\_\_," then you're using distorted thinking and setting yourself up for disappointment.

Note how the source of our hurt feelings is our belief or expectation rather than the other person's actions. Also note how those beliefs or expectations are often wrong or at least distorted in some way.

## Realistic versus unrealistic expectations

"But what if my expectations are not distorted—they're perfectly reasonable?" you may be asking.

It's *okay* to have expectations of others. It's perfectly realistic to expect our partner to be fair, kind, respectful, loving, affectionate, and loyal—*in general*. The *in general* qualification is important because sometimes our partners will fall short. Nobody is perfect!

It's also okay to *hope* for favorable reactions, mutual desires, or pleasant outcomes. But being overrun with negative thoughts or feelings when it doesn't work out is more to do with our expectation than the situation at hand. We'll do better by changing our expectation than by trying to force the situation.

## Overcoming unrealistic expectations

If you find yourself often getting upset and feeling frustrated because your expectations are not being met, look first at whether or not your expectations are unrealistic. If they are, here are some strategies to manage them better:

1. Stop expecting other people to act exactly as you would like them to. Instead, start with low or no expectations of others, then allow yourself to be pleasantly surprised if and when they exceed your expectations.
2. Be aware of what you are feeling. Especially watch for those times when you feel hurt, disappointed, or frustrated with another person. Then, ask yourself what thoughts generated those feelings. Likely there is a missed expectation behind them. Challenge those expectations by asking yourself if they are really true, fair, or realistic, and let go of the ones that are not. The emotion will go away with the expectation.



3. For those pesky expectations that you can't seem to get rid of, remind yourself this is just your present thought in this particular moment. Accept that disappointment happens and remember that these negative feelings always disappear eventually. Dwelling on the other person's actions or worrying about what will happen next just amplifies those feelings well beyond the original slight.
4. Finally, build your own happiness and confidence on something you *do* have power over: your own thoughts and beliefs. True internal peace comes from within, not from other people's actions, words, or love. What you believe about yourself and how you talk to yourself is far more important than another person's opinion, even your partner's.

## Reflection

As you look over the examples and types of distorted thinking, what are some distorted thoughts that you've had? Are there any patterns?

Looking at these now as distorted thoughts, how would you challenge them?



# What causes distorted thinking

It might be helpful to look at what creates these distortions in our mind. What's the “augmented reality code” that generates these false perceptions? It might not be obvious at first, but often it's our fears that are causing our distorted thinking.

The fears we're talking about aren't phobias like being afraid of snakes or heights. Rather, they are deep-seated fears about who we are as a person. They don't serve us well, even if we're aware of them, but especially if we're not. Here are some examples:

- **Failure.** Many of us are frightened of falling short, whether in a project, our career, parenting, or of what society defines as “successful.” Relatedly, we are often scared of becoming successful and then failing to live up to the standard we've set for ourselves.
- **Loss.** We are programmed to feel loss acutely and try to avoid it at all costs, whether it's losing our relationship, health, money, status, or identity.
- **Missing out.** We've all wondered if the grass may, indeed, be greener on the other side. We may be afraid of missing out on a job, the last item on the shelf, or something else we feel we deserve and that others are getting instead.
- **Looking bad.** This is a fear that comes naturally to us as social animals that evolved to live in groups. Being judged as weak, incompetent, stupid, or awkward feels, deep down, like we're going to be cast out of the tribe.
- **Being left out.** Relatedly, most of us are afraid of not fitting in, or of being rejected in some way, whether by a group or an individual. Again, we are probably wired in this way—to be afraid of facing the outside world alone.
- **Not being liked or loved.** This is another deep-seated fear that relates to the fear of being alone. It also threatens our sense of self-worth: if nobody likes or loves us, we fear it must mean we are not worthy of love.
- **Being powerless.** When we are in control, we generally feel safe. But when we don't have control or are under someone else's control, anything could happen to us—or so we fear. This can make us scared of not getting our way, not having a say in decisions, or not being respected by our partner.
- **Change and the unknown.** We tend to resist change, often because we're scared that one of the above things will happen when our world shifts.
- **Death.** Some people are scared of suffering as they approach death. Others fear the unknown part that comes after. For those who think that this life is all there is, the fear that there is nothing afterward can be crippling.

Our fears also often affect us in overlapping ways. For example, people who are scared of failure are often also scared of looking bad and the loss and rejection that might result. Underneath all our fears is usually one big fear: *that we are not enough*.

These fears distort our thinking much like a warped mirror at a funhouse distorts the reflection we see. Because we are highly attuned to threats, our fears “sense” threats even when they don't exist, and magnify them when they do. We end up telling ourselves a story that's usually far worse than reality.

For example, when we see some acquaintances out having fun together, our fear of being left out creates a story that they don't like us and the snub was intentional. In reality, they may be gathered for



some other reason (softball team, book club, work promotion party, school reunion) and we're not part of that group. Perhaps they didn't think to include us. That doesn't mean they don't like us, however. Even if our worst-case scenario is true and this group doesn't like us, it does not mean that no one likes us and we are damned to live our lives alone.

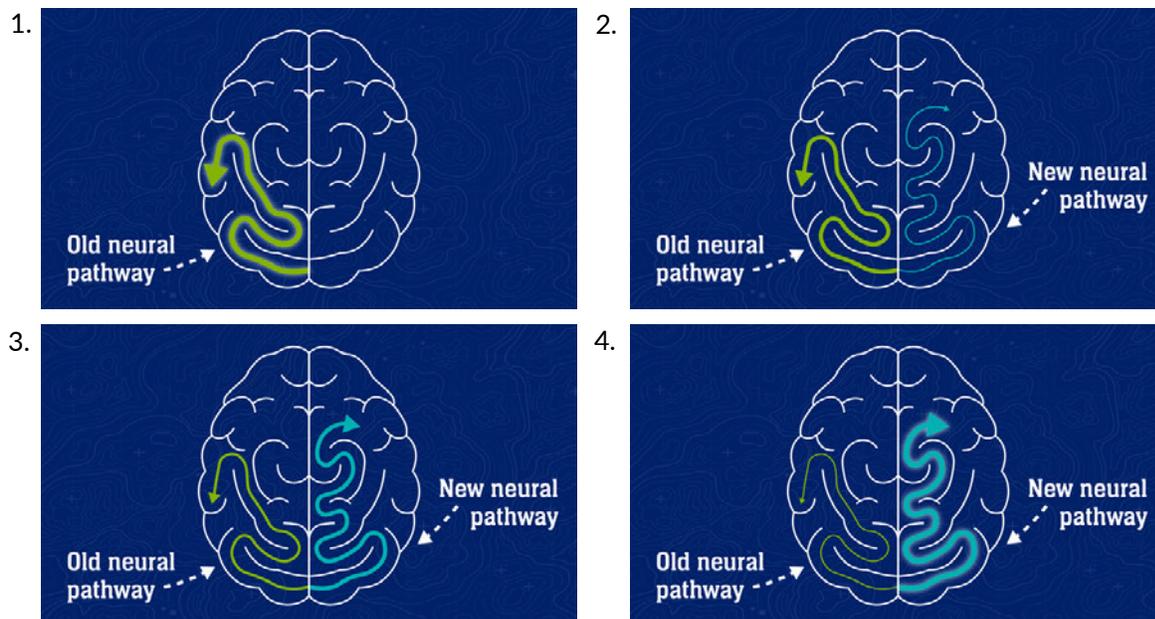
Remember from the last session when we looked at our buttons and asked the question, "Why does this bother me so much?" Often, when we dig deeper into that question, we find one or more of these fears is responsible.

If you're struggling with out-sized, angry reactions, controlling behavior, or other bad conduct that you're trying to change, check to see if you're carrying fear beneath it. Keep asking yourself the question, "Why does this bother me so much?" until you get to a root cause—often a fear! Then, find ways to challenge that fear. You may find that some of the examples we've given in this session serve as inspiration. We'll look more at where our fears come from and what to do about them in the next session.

## Changing your brain's wiring

There's no secret to how we disconnect buttons—it requires repeatedly identifying our distorted thinking, and then firmly challenging those thoughts. When we challenge distorted thinking over and over again, we begin to replace it with more rational, balanced thinking. This means we stop seeing so many situations as threatening, and stop feeling such powerful "I gotta stop this now!" emotions.

This process burns a new neural pathway in our brain through a process called neuroplasticity. Eventually, our buttons start to take different paths than the ones that used to lead to big reactions. As we keep practicing, we get closer and closer to where we want to be—responding constructively to whatever is happening rather than reacting with powerful, destructive, and misguided emotions.



## A practice simulator

One way to accelerate this process of changing our brain's wiring is to practice in a thought simulator, which works the same way as a flight simulator works for training pilots. This is another place where journaling helps because it can help us recall the details of those situations that caused big reactions in the past. We've included a practice simulator in the exercises at the end of this session.

# Viewpoint

## Gender roles and rank

Research shows the best, most satisfying relationships are egalitarian, meaning the partners equally share the benefits, burdens, and responsibilities. These couples share financial obligations, evenly distribute household and parenting responsibilities, and feel equally empowered in family decisions. This doesn't mean each partner's role is identical and every task is split down the middle—it's usually better to share tasks according to each partner's preferences, skills, and interests, as long as both agree each partner's contribution is equal.

Egalitarian couples report having higher satisfaction with their relationship, division of work, and sex life. They also foster less resentment toward their partner—which is a real relationship killer. This makes sense, because all humans have a desire for fairness and a sense of being an autonomous (rather than dependent) individual.

What this means for both men and women is that maintaining an attitude of entitlement or a rigid, gender-based hierarchy in the home is going to damage your relationship—maybe even severely. If you see yourself as king of the castle, or subscribe to the mantra “If momma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy,” check your belief system. These ways of thinking are going to prevent you from entering into or maintaining a healthy relationship.

“Half a truth is often a great lie.”

—Benjamin Franklin



# Faith Perspective

And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.

—[Philippians 4:8](#)

What we think about determines how we feel, how we act, and ultimately, who we become. God, our creator, gives us the above “commandment” because he knows that when our thoughts are fixed on what is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and worthy of praise, we become those things too. Who doesn’t want that?

That means we must be aware of what we think about—because when our thoughts are warped, we’re not going to get there. We have to challenge distortions in our thinking. We must be flexible enough to accommodate the imperfect people (including ourselves) and circumstances around us. We have to take the lies and garbage thoughts that spring from our fears and replace them with thoughts that are in line with how God thinks.

The wisdom in this scripture is clear. What’s less obvious is how much God loves you. Why would an all-powerful God take the time to coach you so that you could become “admirable” and “worthy of praise?” Only a loving father would do that.

## Reflection

What do you find yourself thinking about most of the time? Are your thoughts true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, and admirable, or do they not have these characteristics?

How might changing the way you think change how you act and behave?

Why do you think God wants to coach us?



# Exercises

## Process strong emotional reactions

Continue last session’s exercise for any incident you become upset, angry, or have a conflict with anyone. For question #7, consider whether there’s a less distorted, truthful thought that would have led to a smaller reaction and a better outcome.

|   |                      |
|---|----------------------|
| Date  |                      |
| 1. What happened?   |                      |
| 2. What emotion(s) did you feel?  |                      |
| 3. What thought(s) created the emotion(s)?                              |                      |
| 4. How big of deal was this?  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 5. How big was your reaction?   | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 6. Why did this bother you so much?                                     |                      |
| 7. How else could you think about it so it wouldn’t be such a big deal? |                      |

Duplicate this page for each of the incidents you process.



## Simulator

Here's a way to practice challenging thoughts and responding differently to difficult situations. Try using this simulator once a day during the week and see how your thoughts and emotions change:

1. Find a quiet place where you can be alone for 10-15 minutes.
2. Think of a situation where you reacted too strongly in the past.
3. Conjure up the feelings you had at the time and allow your body to tense up, as if it were actually happening to you right now. The more you try to reproduce the emotions you felt, the more effective the exercise.
4. Now, see if you can remember the distorted thought that caused the tension you felt at the time and set off your overreaction.
5. Challenge that distorted thought by identifying a new, less distorted, more truthful thought.
6. Observe how your body responds to the new, less distorted thought. Can you feel your body relax and leave "high alert" mode?
7. Envision how you would have responded to get the best possible outcome, using the new, less distorted thought as a starting point.
8. Repeat this process every day using different situations.

Eventually, thinking about the situation will no longer cause a strong emotional reaction. You can try it with real situations you experienced in the past, or with invented scenarios that haven't happened.

## Create your timeline

This exercise is going to take some time to complete, but we think you're going to find it very helpful. We'll use this in our next session.

On the next page or in your journal, write out your life story. Notes or bullet points are fine. Focus on the following life stages:

- **Infancy** – 0-2 years old. Our memories are not yet active at this age, so write based on what you've been told about your life during this time.
- **Early childhood** – 2-5 years old
- **Middle childhood** – 5-12 years old
- **Teenage years** – 12-18 years old
- **Early adulthood** – 18-30 years old
- **Later adulthood** – 30-present

For each section, write a little bit about what was going on at that stage of your life. Include:

- The people who influenced you at that time. This could be parents, other family members or caretakers, teachers, coaches, peers, etc.
- The significant events and defining moments, both good and bad, that happened to you during that stage of your life. Some examples might be moving to a different community, trying out for a sports team, the death of a family member, graduation, jobs, relationships, etc. Your general life circumstances during each of these time periods. For example, was your family struggling to make ends meet? Did you live in a high crime area?



| Age        | People | Events | Circumstances |
|------------|--------|--------|---------------|
| 0-2        |        |        |               |
| 2-5        |        |        |               |
| 5-12       |        |        |               |
| 12-18      |        |        |               |
| 18-30      |        |        |               |
| 30-<br>now |        |        |               |



# Guidepost



- Distorted thinking makes us see things as more threatening than they really are, triggering strong emotions and unhelpful reactions.
- Common types of distorted thinking include absolute words like “should,” catastrophizing, blaming, generalizing, and having unrealistic expectations of others and the world around us.
- The source of distorted thinking is almost always a deep-seated fear, such as fear of missing out, fear of failure, or being powerless. fear of not being good enough. Underneath all our fears is usually one big fear: that we are not enough.
- Neuroplasticity, our brain’s ability to create new neural pathways, allows us to gradually change our distorted thinking and disconnect our buttons.
- We can use a simulator to help this process: thinking of an upsetting situation, identifying and challenging our distorted thoughts, and envisioning a more constructive response.





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# SESSION 5

Overcoming Injuries



# The BIG Idea

In the last session, we learned about distorted thoughts. We saw how when we don't perceive things as they really are, we tend to over-react in unnecessary and damaging ways. We identified several different types of distorted thoughts and looked at how to challenge them so they don't create such powerful emotions and strong reactions. We also looked briefly at how our fears create distorted thinking.

In this session, we'll go deeper into where many of our buttons, distorted thoughts, and fears come from: injuries to our identity. These emotional injuries affect our deepest beliefs about ourselves and shape how we act, react, and interact in relationships.

## How identity is formed

What *do* we believe about ourselves? We shape our beliefs by asking questions like:

- Am I good at this?
- Do people like me?
- Am I pretty or handsome?
- How popular, funny, or smart am I?
- Do others accept me?
- Am I liked and loved?

The evidence we gather molds what we think about who we are.

### The origins of our identity

Our parents are usually the first and most influential people to help us answer our questions. Siblings, other authority figures like teachers and coaches, role models, and peers also serve as mirrors, reflecting back answers.

These reflections are especially defining in our childhood because we don't know differently and we cannot challenge their truth. Unfortunately, this means we can pick up negative as well as positive messages about our identity without realizing. For example:

- When a parent quickly sets aside our handmade gift, we think we disappoint them and don't measure up.
- If our classmates tease us about our clothes, we think we're awkward and don't fit in.
- Should a coach or teacher say we're dumb or lazy, the label sticks and we believe it.

Our identity does not stay fixed after childhood, however. Here are a few examples of things that might shape our identity later in life:

- When our spouse is disappointed with our cooking or ability to fix the car, we think we don't measure up.
- A poor work review, paltry pay raise, skipped promotion, or job loss says we're a failure.
- Acquaintances who don't invite us to their get-together send the message that we don't fit in or are not likable.



- We're exposed to racism, sexism, homophobia, or some other form of discrimination, which implies that we're inferior.
- Judgmental church leaders or members who point out our moral failings (sins) without accompanying grace seem to be saying that we are a bad person.
- Images in the media that show perfect people illustrate that we don't have the body, looks, money, or possessions to be acceptable.

## Big, defining moments

All of us face situations like the examples above. While they might seem like ordinary, everyday occurrences, they can carry a big impact. Other experiences are truly momentous life events which nearly always leave their mark:

- Our parents get divorced, which might mean we're exposed to their conflicts, separated from one or both, or introduced to stepparents or stepsiblings.
- A parent dies, setting in motion other consequences like changing family roles, a grieving and unavailable surviving parent, or moving away from a familiar home or community.
- One parent goes to prison, creating financial struggles, social stigma, and our own undeserved shame.
- A parent neglects or abandons us, even if they are still physically present, sending the message that we don't matter.
- We're emotionally, physically, or sexually abused, shaping the belief that we're not safe or worthy of care and respect.

### Reflection

Which identity-shaping experiences discussed above have you had?

“Healing comes from honest confrontation with our injury or with our past. Whatever that thing is that has hurt us or traumatized us, until we face it head on, we will have issues moving forward in a healthy way.”

—Nate Parker



# Injuries to our core identity

Some things we believe about ourselves are no big deal. Other questions, however, strike at issues that are *essential* to our identity and self-esteem:

- Am I worthy?
- Am I valuable?
- Am I lovable?
- Do I matter?

We tend to answer these core questions by looking at a combination of the messages we've picked up about ourselves throughout our lives, and the big, defining moments we've experienced—whether favorable or unfavorable.

Answering these questions with anything other than a resounding “YES!” is false and distorted. But hearing too many negative messages, or experiencing an especially traumatizing event, can leave us believing otherwise.

“No” or “I’m not sure” answers to one of the above questions is the outcome of an injury to our identity. Sadly, many of us see ourselves as “broken,” “messed up,” or “damaged goods” because of our injuries. This conclusion is *not* the truth of who we actually are.

And when we believe the answer is “no” or we’re unsure, it leads us to all kinds of dysfunctional behaviors as we attempt to fill that void and change the answer to a “yes.”

## How distorted identity shapes behavior

How we feel about ourselves plays a huge role in how we respond to many life situations. When our identity has been injured by flawed mirrors and painful experiences, it becomes distorted. Then, we behave in ways that hurt others, damage our relationships, and don't serve us well. Often this goes one of two ways: we compulsively try to control people and situations around us, or we withdraw to avoid failure and rejection.

Many of these dysfunctional behaviors may appear on the surface as us acting badly, selfishly, immorally, or hurtfully. The driving force behind them, however, is our attempt to change those negative core beliefs we hold about ourselves. Here are several examples of unhelpful or hurtful behaviors and the identity issues that might be driving them:

### General

- Pushing too hard to prove that we're right—and therefore valuable.
- Wanting too badly to win or have things go our way, again as an indicator of our value.
- Being overly sensitive to criticism because it feels like rejection.
- Frequently reacting with anger or attempting to control others so their actions don't reflect negatively on us.
- Overspending on new things—like cars or clothes—because it shows people that we're successful and helps us feel valuable, deserving, and worthy.
- Rebelling against parents, authorities, institutions, and rules, either to get attention or mask our fear that we don't live up to their standards.



## Work and career

- Working to over-achieve or becoming a perfectionist, perhaps to the point of exhaustion, to prove that we matter or are important.
- Being devastated by unemployment, a business failure, or a bad review because we associate our success at work with our self-worth.
- Avoiding risks such as applying for jobs or schools, or not fully using our talents, for fear of failure, which would “prove” we’re not worthy.

## Social

- Avoiding certain social situations or people for fear of rejection.
- Not opening up or being vulnerable, or sub-consciously sabotaging relationships, to prevent the potential sting of rejection.
- Trying to win acceptance and approval by bragging, showing off, or being funny—which often has the opposite effect and puts people off.
- Pressuring others to compliment, care for, or pay attention to us, so we feel safe and good about ourselves.
- Becoming a people pleaser to get others to like us. However, our efforts come at a great personal cost, such as exhaustion, not feeling like we can be ourselves, or not taking care of our own needs.

## Family and intimate relationships

- Caring for others while simultaneously resenting them for not being grateful enough. This is co-dependency, and it’s an attempt to prove to ourselves that we are both valuable and appreciated.
- Getting married or having children, thinking that becoming a spouse or parent will provide the meaning and validation we’re looking for.
- Being sexually aggressive, unfaithful, or promiscuous in an effort to feel validated and desirable.

## Inner life

- Avoiding situations where strong feelings may arise, because we misinterpret those negative emotions to mean that there is something wrong with us.
- Feeling emotionally numb, depressed, anxious, or generally dissatisfied with life because we believe the identity lies and think there is nothing we can do to change them.
- Engaging in self-destructive behaviors like extreme risk-taking, eating disorders, cutting, addictions, and suicide attempts to numb our pain and punish ourselves for being broken.

Note how varied and far-reaching the effects of an injured, distorted identity can be. While many of these behaviors seem like opposites of each other, they are all responses to what we think others think about us. In almost all cases we’re trying to either fill a void or prove that something negative—one of our deep-seated fears—isn’t true.

All these responses have a way of damaging and destroying our relationships. None of them make us feel better, at least not in the long-term. But until our distorted identity is corrected and our injuries are healed, stopping these dysfunctional behaviors will be exceedingly difficult.



## Reflection

What are some examples of your unproductive or hurtful behaviors that are likely linked to what you believe about yourself?

# Looking for our value

When our identity has been injured and our emotional needs are unmet, we tend to turn to external factors for validation. Popular culture says our value comes from:

- Success and career
- Popularity
- Education
- Money/possessions
- Image/reputation
- Personal characteristics like being funny, smart, etc.
- Relationships and family

Nothing in the list is inherently bad. However, if any one of these forms the basis of our identity, they'll sooner or later leave us feeling insignificant, disappointed, and unsatisfied. We miss our goals, our popularity wanes, our status fails to win us friends, our relationships end, or our loved ones upset us in some way. That's a problem if we're pinning our identity on one (or more) of these things.

## Reflection

As you look over the list above, which of these sources have you used to define your identity and self-esteem? Hint: if you're not sure, ask yourself, "Would losing any of these put me into a panic?"



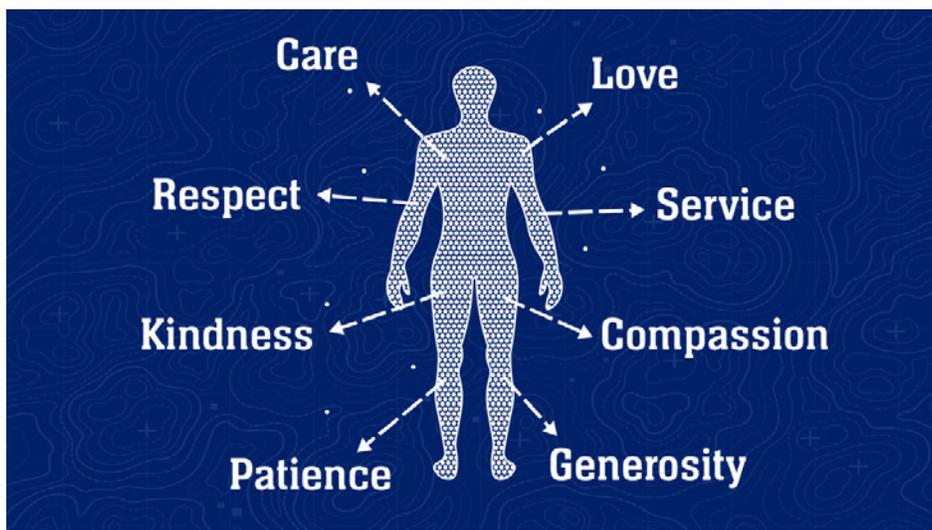
## A different way to heal

One constant in life is that we always need to eat. However, if we've just finished a solid meal, we tend to not spend much time or energy on finding food. Our hunger has been satisfied.

The same can be said about meeting our identity needs. We'll always need approval. But if our need is already filled, we don't have to spend much effort trying to feed our soul. That requirement has already been met.

Imagine if we didn't have to act a certain way to gain others' approval because their approval genuinely didn't matter much to us. What if we already felt confident and good about ourselves? How freeing would that be?

Take a look at the diagrams below. The first shows a person whose identity needs are not met. Like a vacuum sucking in from the environment around them, they require constant service, attention, and love to feel ok about themselves. The second shows a person who is so full of healthy self-esteem, they *overflow* with service, attention, and love for other people. Which would you rather be?



# Changing our identity

The alternative to a negative, distorted identity is a positive, truthful one. Use the replacement technique to fix identity issues, like we did in the last session when we challenged and replaced distorted thoughts. Pinpoint the beliefs that are holding you back and replace them with more constructive ones.

While this process sounds simple enough, most people find it difficult to accomplish. It takes time and effort. Some identity issues and scars remain with us a lifetime. That said, it's quite possible to see changes within a few months as we heal and reduce the power these injuries hold over us.

Don't be afraid to get help. Counselors are trained to help us spot those lies we believe about who we are and put healthier truths into place. They have developed a variety of techniques that work to recondition our emotional memories and thought patterns, and have been proven to be effective in helping people heal.

Even if you don't have access to a counselor, here are some techniques you can use to change how you see yourself:

## Affirmations

Affirmations replace dysfunctional self-talk with more constructive words. The power of changing what "the voice in your head" says to you on a day-to-day basis cannot be understated.

One way to implement affirmations is to write your negative belief on one side of a note card, then a positive alternative on the other. Read the old belief aloud, then flip the card over and read the new one aloud. For example, the card might say:

- **Old belief:** I'm a failure.
- **New belief:** I have succeeded at many things in life (list them), and with my positive attitude about learning, growth, and change, I will continue to build my success.

Make a new card for each negative belief. Read your affirmations daily, or even several times a day. You'll likely need to continue reciting these statements for several weeks, months, or even years for your mind to fully adopt the new belief.

## Thinking logically

One way to overcome a false belief is by proving it is illogical. Take newborn babies, for example. Are they worthy? Good? Important? Lovable? Of course they are. They have value just for being. You were a newborn baby at one time. Therefore, you were worthy, good, important, and lovable as a newborn, too. When did that change? The answer, of course, is that it didn't change. You still are all of those things.

Another example is to picture a \$100 bill. It doesn't matter how many times it's folded, dropped, stepped on, accidentally washed, hung out to dry, torn, or even scrunched up and thrown in the trash: that piece of paper is always worth \$100. You're like that \$100 bill. No matter what has happened to you, your value has not changed.



## Visualization

Visualization involves imagining yourself thinking and acting in a more positive way. What would a person who sees themselves as \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank with the core belief about yourself that you are working to change) think and do? In your mind, imagine yourself as that person.

For example, if you think you're socially awkward, imagine yourself confidently walking into a party or a networking event. See yourself interacting with several different people. Picture yourself asking and answering questions, and the other people responding with understanding, interest, and acceptance.

## Fake it 'till you make it

The “fake it 'till you make it” strategy puts actions first. Force yourself to do something that stretches you outside of your comfort zone. Then, when you see yourself succeeding or behaving in a new way, it becomes easier to believe a different narrative about yourself.

You might have been told—and you might believe—that you are a selfish person who lets others down. So make yourself do something for others, like volunteering at a local food bank or signing up to give flu shots. Once you commit, the social obligation of your promise can be the push that ensures you actually fulfill it. The things you believe about yourself will shift to match your actions.

## Reframe your memories

Altering how you think about those defining events is yet another tactic. Reframing the *meaning* of an event can give you a positive rather than a negative take-away from the experience. Look for the aspects for which you can be grateful and proud.

For example, a person who was adopted might fixate on negative emotions they feel about their history, like abandonment or rejection. However, they could switch their viewpoint and instead celebrate their resilience, remind themselves of the opportunities they had because they grew up somewhere else, and appreciate the selfless love that their adopted family provided.

## Self-care through time travel

Look back on some of those defining events and experiences that wounded your identity. Now, imagine traveling back in time and talking to the younger version of yourself. How would you comfort them, make them feel safe, or tell them they're worthy? What advice or perspective would you give them that they (you) should have received at the time?

The adult version of you knows that your parent's divorce was not your fault, or that the criticism you received as an eight-year-old was overly harsh and did not reflect age-appropriate expectations. As the adult you “talks” to the child you, you are freed from holding on to the self-protective behaviors you developed as a coping mechanism so long ago.

“You can't let praise or criticism get to you. It's a weakness to get caught up in either one.”

—John Wooden



# How spirituality can change identity

Remember the big, unanswered questions we might have about our identity?

- Am I worthy?
- Am I valuable?
- Am I lovable?
- Do I matter?

These can be a struggle to answer, even when we use some of the identity changing techniques discussed above. Sometimes we just can't convince ourselves that the old identity is wrong or a new one is right. Here is a powerful identity-changing dynamic to consider: contemplate what God says about you.

## God's appraisal qualifications

God is uniquely qualified to answer questions about our identity. He is all-knowing, all-powerful, good, loving, eternally present, and the creator of all things, including you.

If you're not sure you believe these characteristics about God are true, check them out for yourself. Start by reading one of the four books in the Bible known as the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. See what you can learn about the truth of God's existence and his character and nature. Or, find a course like Alpha where you're encouraged to explore the faith and ask tough questions about it.

## What God says about you

God is qualified to determine our value better than anyone else. But what does God say about you? He says you are:

- **Wanted.** He created you because he wanted to have a relationship with you. Even if you were a surprise to your parents, you're not a mistake or accident to God. You were planned from the beginning. He calls you his beloved son or daughter.
- **Valuable.** God sent his son Jesus to die so he can have a relationship with you. The price of this sacrifice is immense, and it indicates just how valuable you are to him.
- **Beautiful.** God made you uniquely, not like anyone else. That's why it makes no sense to compare yourself to others. He also designed you wonderfully in his own image. He was involved in all the details, and he delights in you. God doesn't make junk.
- **Secure.** God is our protector and provider. As a result, you can walk without fear. He does not take away all that troubles us, but he walks through our troubles with us and wins the ultimate battles in our life. With this perspective, everything else is a mere bump in the road.
- **Enough.** Everything is not up to you. God has a bigger plan and is in control. He wants you to be a part of it, but you're not responsible for any more than just you. When you give your best, he does the rest.
- **Forgiven.** As an all-seeing, all-knowing God, he is well aware of your mistakes. Yet, as a loving God full of grace and mercy, he also has the power and desire to forgive your mistakes. No person on earth has that power.



- **Redeemed.** God can take your mistakes and weave them into something beautiful, meaningful, and fulfilling. The hardships you've experience can be used to help you overcome future challenges or to inspire others when they face similar difficulties.
- **Called for a purpose.** God wants you to be a part of what he's doing in this world. He wants you to be a blessing to others, and in turn, to be blessed when you follow this calling. You're needed, uniquely equipped, and given a valuable role to play. Finding and fulfilling that role is the greatest sense of purpose and accomplishment you'll encounter.

Hopefully you've identified the lies that you're carrying about your identity and seen how far they are from God's truth. When we see ourselves as wanted, valued, and deeply loved by God, we no longer demand that those around us constantly meet our needs or reflect a positive identity back to us. Still, it can even be difficult to fully believe what God says. We've internalized the lies for so long, they're not easily replaced.

It takes time and intentional effort to change what we believe about ourselves. While significant progress can be made in a relatively short period of time, lingering doubts are common. Challenging and changing these deep, core beliefs is a lifetime journey for most of us.

## Accepting your true identity

Here are some techniques you can use to change how you see yourself by accepting how God sees you:

### Affirmations

The affirmation technique described earlier works even better when we add a spiritual aspect. Like before, write down on one side of a notecard the distorted belief you're struggling to release. Then, on the other side, write the truth of what God says about you. Now, you're not just trying to convince yourself of this new truth, but accepting what God, creator of the universe, says. Some examples:

- **Lie:** No one likes or loves me.
- **Truth:** God loves me. In fact, he's crazy about me. He suffered and sacrificed greatly just so he could have a relationship with me.
- **Lie:** I'm a bad person because I've hurt people.
- **Truth:** God has forgiven my past. I'm free to be the good person he created me to be from here forward.
- **Lie:** I've ruined my life and it will never be good again.
- **Truth:** God has good plans for me and has promised me a bright future.
- **Lie:** I'm not good enough.
- **Truth:** I don't need to earn God's favor. God calls me his friend right now.

### Reframe your memories

As with affirmations, altering how we look at defining events is made more powerful with an understanding of how God works in our lives. While God does not cause bad things to happen, he stays with us and works to make something good out of every hurt and hardship we experience.



Reframe the meaning of past painful or unjust events by looking at how God might have been working in those circumstances:

- What bad things didn't happen that could have happened?
- How did God create something positive out of your experience?
- What might God still be preparing you for as a result of what you went through or are currently going through?

Since God is eternal, his timeline is often longer than ours. We may wonder why something is happening to us, but God's plan is bigger than what we can see. Maintaining this vantage point helps us see any event or period in our lives with a better perspective.

If you're looking for a powerful example of God working to create good from the evil, read the story of Joseph in the Bible. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, released, and falsely imprisoned, before finally being in a position to save his family and an entire nation. You can find the story in the book of Genesis, Chapters 37-50.

## A note about your parents

By the way, this is not about blaming your parents for your hurts or the problems they cause. Chances are they did the best they could with what knowledge and tools they had. They, too, are imperfect people with their own issues. None of us escape childhood unscathed. We all have injuries, to varying degrees.

This discussion is only to help you understand how your identity might have been hurt or distorted, so you can begin changing it. We carry those injuries around until we intentionally work to heal them. Regardless of what has happened to you, it is now your job to fix it and make it better. No one else can do that for you.

“He heals the brokenhearted and bandages their wounds.”

—[Psalm 147:3](#)



# Viewpoint

## Resentment

It might not be intuitive, but many people find that resentment is behind their acts of domestic violence or abuse.

We all feel resentment sometimes. Usually, it's a temporary feeling that occurs when we suffer some sort of injustice. It goes away when we receive an apology or realize we misinterpreted things. However, it can also be a persistent emotion that lingers with us for months or even years, stopping us from feeling peace and enjoying life.

Some signs you may be harboring resentment include:

- Continually feeling a strong emotion, like anger, when you think about a particular person or experience.
- Inability to stop thinking about an event that triggered strong emotions.
- Wanting to get revenge on someone or for something.
- Feeling deflated when other people succeed.
- Reveling in another person's failure.
- Feeling invisible, inadequate, or less-than.

Over time, resentment can distort our thinking and makes us prone to oversimplification, confirmation bias, and an inability to grasp other perspectives or distinguish our own thoughts from reality. And, it can push us to act in ways that harm our partners, damage our relationships, and ultimately hurt us. Resentful people often believe, perhaps subconsciously, that they will feel better by tearing others down. If we are chronically resentful, our relationships may be characterized by:

- Seeking external emotional regulation: attempting to control or devalue our partner rather than managing our own unpleasant emotions.
- Defensiveness: deflecting criticism, making it impossible for our partner to raise legitimate complaints.
- Power struggles: exerting power to win during conflict rather than trying to reconcile and reconnect.
- Stonewalling: shutting down or shutting out a loved one to punish them or get them to give in.
- Contempt: an inability to see our partner and their actions in a balanced, generous way.
- Anxiety or "walking on eggshells": our partner second-guesses themselves and tries to avoid upsetting us.

The irony is that these actions work to drive our partners away and only make us feel worse in the long run. Making someone else feel bad about themselves provides no resolution for our feelings and no "payback" for the past.

Rather than punishing another for our negative feelings, we can use those uncomfortable emotions as motivation to heal ourselves. That healing process starts with acknowledging and facing our resentment, and the injury that lies beneath.

Moving on from resentment continues when we forgive. Note that forgiving is *not* excusing or forgetting. In fact, we may still have *every right* to feel angry, hurt, or offended. But when we forgive, we willingly *give up that right*. In doing so, we remove the power of that event or person to continue hurting us and open ourselves up to a better future.



# Faith Perspective

See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are!

—[1 John 3:1](#)

The king of the universe calls us his adopted *children* when we accept his offer to have a relationship with him. What does that mean? It means we have rights and privileges that are far greater than those of mere subjects or servants of the king. It means:

- **You are loved and accepted.** There is nothing you need to do to earn God's love. There is nothing you can do to lose God's love. It's unconditional and permanent. He made you, he chose you, and you are enough.
- **You receive his grace and forgiveness just by asking.** God does not always *like* what his children do, but does he always love them.
- **You have access to him.** You don't need to wait until God isn't busy. You are his #1 priority. He's with you always, and you have God's full attention whenever you call to him.
- **He's there to guide you.** Good parents want their children to succeed. They generously share their wisdom and give good guidance to help their kids. God makes his infinite and perfect wisdom available to you if you seek it.
- **He created you on purpose, for a purpose.** He made you specially the way you are, with unique talents and abilities. He has a role for you to fill in his master plan.

The idea of God as a parent might not be a good association if our experience with one or both of our parents wasn't healthy. Earthly parents, like all humans, are flawed. But God, our heavenly father, is not. He is everything a good parent is meant to be: creator, provider, teacher, discipliner, advisor, counselor, supporter, and giver of unconditional love. As a result, a relationship with God gives us everything we need to live a full and abundant life: security, confidence, wisdom, and love.

Regardless of what your earthly parents were like, any damage they did can be healed through a relationship with your heavenly father. He wants to adopt you. You'll be blessed by accepting his offer.

## Reflection

How does thinking about God as your perfect, heavenly father change the way you see him?

Is there a difference between how you see yourself and the beloved child that God sees when he looks at you? Which version do you believe?



# Exercises

## Process strong emotional reactions

Continue writing down answers to these seven questions as you process any incident where you become upset, angry, or have a conflict with someone.

|   |                      |
|---|----------------------|
| Date  |                      |
| 1. What happened?   |                      |
| 2. What emotion(s) did you feel?  |                      |
| 3. What thought(s) created the emotion(s)?                              |                      |
| 4. How big of deal was this?  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 5. How big was your reaction?   | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 6. Why did this bother you so much?                                     |                      |
| 7. How else could you think about it so it wouldn't be such a big deal? |                      |

Duplicate this page for each incident you process.



## Revisiting and reflecting on your timeline

Now that you have studied identity—where it comes from and how it affects your behavior—go back and look over the autobiography you wrote in the Session 4 exercise. Add any other details that may have shaped what you believe about yourself. Then, reflect on the following questions:

1. What messages did you get about yourself from your caretakers, the significant events in your life, and your life circumstances? Focus on messages about your value, worthiness, and lovability.
2. Which messages did you receive that were/are particularly painful?
3. Were there things you needed to do to get attention, care, or love?
4. What are some messages you still receive today that are particularly painful?
5. How do these identity injuries match up with your buttons—the things that seem to set you off? Try to give a couple of examples of buttons and corresponding injuries and distorted core beliefs.
6. How would you challenge those distorted core beliefs and begin to heal the corresponding injury? Try using one of the techniques we discussed in this session.



# Guidepost



- Our identity is formed by a combination of the messages we receive about ourselves and the big, defining moments in our lives—*especially* during our childhood.
- Beliefs like “I’m not good enough” and “I’m not lovable” are injuries to our identity and are fundamentally untrue.
- Identity injuries lead to dysfunctional and harmful behaviors in our work, social, intimate, and personal lives. Stopping these behaviors for good requires healing those injuries.
- Relying on external sources of validation to fill our identity needs will never work in the long run—self-esteem has to come from within.
- Techniques such as affirmations, reframing painful memories, and developing a relationship with God can help us shift to a more positive, truthful view of ourselves.





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**SESSION 6**

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Focusing on the Trail



# The BIG Idea

The last three sessions were focused on identifying and challenging distorted beliefs. We started by identifying the buttons that trigger our strong reactions. Then we worked on disconnecting our buttons, or at least reducing their power, by challenging distorted thinking. In the last session we dug into the emotional injuries and identity issues that underpin our distorted thoughts.

Challenging distorted thinking—whether as small as “he shouldn’t say that” or as big as “I’m no good”—is an important technique and one that works for most people and most thoughts. However, there will be some buttons that just don’t seem to go away. Some of them may even be true, undistorted thoughts—and we are still uncomfortable with them. In this session, we’re going to learn about three other strategies for handling these uncomfortable thoughts: staying present, acceptance, and committed action.

## Unhelpful thoughts

In Session 4 we focused on *distorted* thoughts—those twisted, false messages that make us see things as worse than they really are. In many cases we just need to practice challenging those lies and seeing the truth instead. In other cases our thoughts may be true, but they still don’t contribute anything positive or help us enjoy a full and productive life. We can call these *unhelpful* thoughts.

Thinking is not the problem, because not all thoughts are unhelpful. In fact, recalling pleasant memories and past successes, or planning how we are going to make our future better, are usually *helpful* thoughts. They *do* help us enjoy a more full and productive life.

In this session, we are going to continue to work on noticing our thoughts. Adding on to this, we will start to ask ourselves if the thought is *helpful* or *unhelpful*.

## Judgment and criticism

When our mind is thinking, it is often making judgments. We *like* the looks of the car driving next to us. We’re *annoyed* by the person on their cell phone in the checkout lane ahead of us. In both of these cases, we’re adding our own personal evaluation of “good” or “bad” to what we’re observing.

Some of the most challenging and damaging thoughts we have are the judgements and criticisms we tell ourselves. Here are some examples:

- I’m not very smart.
- I’m too shy.
- I’m boring.
- I’m hopelessly flawed.
- I’m damaged goods.
- I’m a loser.
- No one could love me.



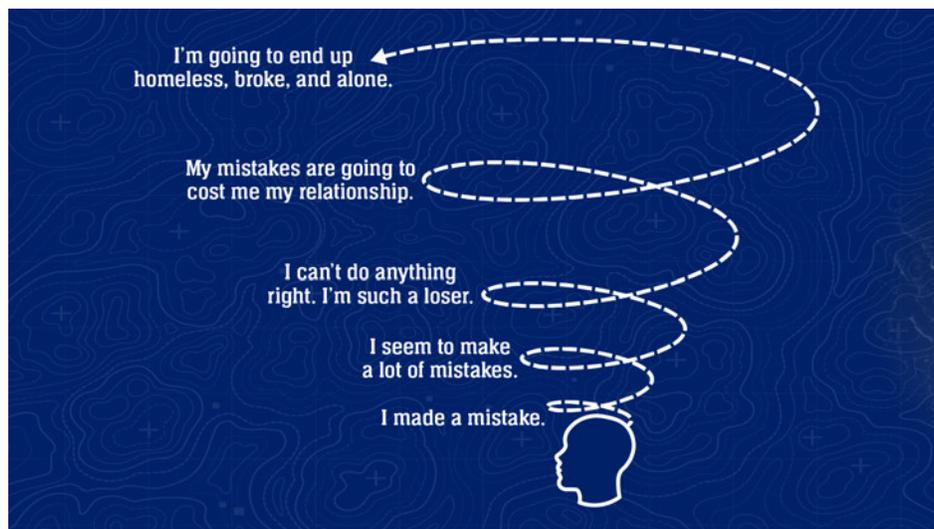
Often, these kinds of thoughts are identity injuries like those we discussed in Session 5, based on lies we picked up during our past. Sometimes there's an element of truth—maybe you *are* shy. But either way, ask yourself if the thought is helpful. If it isn't, aim to let it go using one of the techniques we cover later in this session.

## Getting hooked

One of the problems with unhelpful thoughts is they have a tendency of getting us to obsess about them—something that psychologists call *getting hooked*. Once hooked, we tend to layer additional negative thoughts on top of the original one. This is called *amplifying*.

For example, you may be playing golf and hit a shot that just rolls across the ground. You make a judgment and say it was a “bad” shot. Then you think about all the other bad shots you've hit in your lifetime and think, “I'm not very good at golf.” This statement may be true or false, but either way, it is not going to help you play better or enjoy your experience more. It is an *unhelpful thought*.

From there, you may *amplify* your unhelpful thought by adding that you're not very athletic. “In fact,” you think, “I pretty much suck at everything I try.” As you continue to add more negative thoughts, you come to the conclusion that you're a loser. See how our thoughts can spiral out of control, all because of something as minor as hitting a “bad” golf shot?



You may have seen a cartoon or an old western movie where someone falls into quicksand. The more they struggle, the more they sink. Our uncomfortable thoughts work the same way. It's when we struggle with those thoughts that we amplify them and make them worse. Stop struggling, and we stop sinking. The uncomfortable thought is still there, but it doesn't pull us under.



## Unhelpful thoughts and domestic abuse or violence

In earlier sessions, we looked at the signals that warn us when we are heading toward doing something we'll regret. We may be more possessive, demanding, and irritable. We may use harsh words, have fits of anger, try to control our partner, or increase our use of alcohol or drugs. All of these signs are telling us that tension is building inside of us.

This pattern is perfectly consistent with what we have described so far about unhelpful thoughts. We start by adding our own judgment and criticism to a situation, another person, or ourselves. We get hooked on this unhelpful thought and struggle with it, which only serves to amplify it. Soon, the tension builds to a point where we feel compelled to do something that will make it stop.

This is when we are most likely to behave in a way that hurts someone else—and why learning to handle our uncomfortable thoughts is critical to becoming a safe partner.

### Reflection

What is a belief about yourself you identified in Session 5 that is an uncomfortable thought?

Is this uncomfortable thought helpful or unhelpful?

What are some of the thoughts that you tend to add on to this unhelpful thought that amplifies your discomfort (makes it worse)?

## Handling unhelpful thoughts

You may now be wondering, “so what can I do with uncomfortable thoughts?” and in particular, “how do I keep from amplifying them so they don't get worse?”

Let's look at some strategies that can keep these unhelpful thoughts from wrecking your round of golf, pushing you toward behavior you regret, or holding you back from a full and productive life.

Note we are sharing only very brief introductions to these strategies. The details of these different techniques are beyond what we can cover here, but if they seem like they would be helpful to you, we encourage you to dig deeper. Since all these concepts make the most sense and work best when you practice them in real life, consider working with a counselor who specializes in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) or reading a book on the topic.



# Strategy I: Staying present

## Mindfulness

Mindfulness is simply being aware of what is occupying our mind at any given time, with flexibility, openness, and curiosity. At times, our mind is focused on what is going on around us in the present moment. If we're driving in heavy traffic and fully paying attention to the road, our vehicle, and the other drivers, then our mind is said to be "present." We are in *observing* mode.

Many times, however, we are actually thinking about something in the past, replaying a memory, or rehashing something that happened a few minutes or several years ago. Or, our thoughts are on what the future could be—we're solving a problem, planning, daydreaming, fantasizing, or worrying about it. In any of these cases, our mind is in *thinking* mode.

Our minds can switch very quickly from observing to thinking and back again, often mixing it all together. It's as if someone were holding down the button on the TV remote, rapidly flicking through different sights and sounds of each channel. When we make a judgment about something we observe, like deciding that the person ahead of us in the checkout line is annoying, or that we just hit a "bad shot," our minds have changed from observing mode to thinking mode.

Try the following practice exercise and notice how your mind switches back and forth between observing and thinking mode.

### Exercise: awareness of breath

The objective of this exercise is to help you *observe* what's going on in the present, but also notice how easily your mind can switch into *thinking* mode. Breathing is often used in mindfulness exercises because your breath is with you all the time. This exercise isn't about trying to change how you breathe—your breath simply provides a thing for you to pay attention to.

The objective here is to stay in the moment as best you can. You aren't striving to get away from anything, go anywhere, or block out anything out. You're not even trying to relax. That often happens, but you can't force yourself into feeling it.

Also, note that you can't be good or bad at this exercise. You'll never fix unwavering attention on your breath, so give yourself a break if you can't—that is expected. Some days you'll be distracted almost the entire time, and other days you'll be able to focus on your breath more. Either way is perfect, because we want you to simply notice how your mind switches back and forth, whether it's a little or a lot. Avoid clock-watching.



## Instructions

Sit comfortably, finding a stable position you can maintain for a while, either on the floor or in a chair. When you are through reading these instructions, set a timer for 3 minutes. This will help you avoid clock-watching.

Close your eyes if you like, or leave them open and gaze downward toward the floor. Draw your attention to the physical sensation of breathing, perhaps noticing the always-present rising and falling of your abdomen or chest, or the air moving in and out through your nose or mouth. With each breath, bring attention to these sensations. If you like, you can mentally note: “Breathing in... Breathing out.”

You will get distracted by thoughts or feelings—probably many times. You may feel distracted more often than not. That’s normal. There’s no need to block or eliminate thinking or anything else. Without giving yourself a hard time or expecting anything different, when you discover that your attention has wandered, notice whatever has distracted you and then come back to focusing on your breath.

Let go of any sense of trying to make something happen. For these few minutes, create an opportunity to not plan, fix anything, or do whatever else is a habit for you. Exert just enough effort to carry out this exercise, but without causing yourself mental strain. If you find yourself mostly daydreaming, devote a little extra effort to maintaining your focus.

Breathe in and breathe out. If your mind wanders, return your attention to the breath each time. Practice observing without needing to react. Just sit and pay attention.

As hard as it is to maintain, that’s all there is. Come back over and over again without judgment or expectation. It may seem simple, but it’s never easy.

Source: <https://www.mindful.org/mindfulness-meditation-guided-practices/>

## Reflection

Did you notice your mind going from focusing on your breath (observing mode) to getting distracted (thinking mode)?

Did it go into the past, future, or both?



## How the strategy of staying present works

What would happen if we just observed things around us, without adding the judgment or criticism? Consider this:

- As long as our mind is in the observing mode, it cannot be in thinking mode.
- If it is not in thinking mode, then it is not adding judgments or criticisms.
- If we are not in thinking mode, then we can't have negative, unhelpful thoughts.
- If we are not having negative, unhelpful thoughts, then we won't struggle with (amplify) those thoughts.

Going back to the golf example, you could hit that same shot and just observe it rolling across the grass for a few feet. You could then simply walk over to it and hit the next shot from there, without passing judgment about whether it was a good or bad shot, and without evaluating your golfing or other abilities. You could pay attention to the breeze, the sun, the pattern of the grass, and the birds flying by. By noticing that you've had an unhelpful thought, and then gently setting it aside, you are free to simply enjoy the round of golf. In fact, you'll probably play better for the rest of the round because you're not upset about your "bad" shot.

The strategy of staying present is built on the fact that we can't focus on what is happening around us *and* stew at the same time. If you observe yourself struggling with negative, unhelpful thoughts, use the mindfulness technique we just learned to bring your focus back to the present. Focus on observing your surroundings *without judgment*. If you constantly interrupt your unhelpful thoughts, they will not gain enough traction to build to dangerous levels.

## Other ways of staying present

Here are a few other ways to stay present and break out of the stewing-amplification cycle:

- Look around the room and observe all the details. What is the texture of the walls? What shadows do the lights make? What sounds do you hear? What is the temperature of the room?
- Take a walk in nature and observe all the details. What different colors do you see? What shapes and patterns do you see in the trees. How does the grass move in the breeze? What sounds do you hear?
- Read a book, watch a movie, or play a video game. Immerse yourself in the story and the action.
- Do some activity that occupies your mind, like following a new recipe or completing a puzzle.

If you notice your mind wandering during these activities, gently refocus your attention back on the task.

“Clouds come floating into my life, no longer to carry rain or usher storm, but to add color to my sunset sky.”

—Rabindranath Tagore



# Strategy 2: Acceptance

## Facing disappointments

Bad stuff happens. All of us have to face frustration, disappointment, rejection, loss, and failure. That's just a fact of life. There are two things we can do when the circumstances are not what we would prefer them to be:

- Try to change them, or
- Accept them.

Changing our circumstances is a good strategy *when it is within our power to do so*. If I'm cold, I can put on a jacket. If I'm unemployed, I can apply for a job. These things are within my power to change, or at least influence the outcome, because they only involve *me*.

We get into trouble, however, when we try to change our circumstances by controlling others. It's fine to ask others, including our partners, for their cooperation in making things the way we'd like them to be. We can *request* that someone turn up the thermostat, offer us a job, or act in whatever way we would prefer them to. But it's *up to that person* whether they choose to comply.

Trying to preside over other people's thoughts, opinions, or actions goes too far, especially if we use anger, intimidation, put-downs, threats, punishment, or tactics meant to make them feel "crazy". Our efforts to manage our own circumstances have crossed the line into managing another person against their will—something none of us has a right to do.

### Reflection

What is a situation that you face or have faced in the past that was inconvenient, disappointing, or unfortunate?

What did/can you do that is within your power to change this situation?

What part of the outcome is NOT within your power to control (hint: think about other people's decisions and actions)?



## Acceptance process

Once we've done all we can do *within our own power* to manage our circumstances, we're done. This means that sometimes, things *still* won't be the way we wanted them to be.

That's when acceptance becomes a very useful tool. This doesn't mean we resign ourselves to living a miserable life or liking whatever is making us suffer. It simply means being realistic about life's inevitable disappointments, rather struggling with them, *and getting on with our lives at the same time*.

There are many, many different ways of thinking about the "acceptance" process—different ones will make sense to different people. Frequently, people use metaphors, paradoxes, and experiential exercises, which are often are fun, creative, and clever. Here are a few different ways to think about your uncomfortable thought or feeling that can help you accept it:

- See it as a passenger on a bus. You are the bus driver, and it is a passenger on the bus, but you are still driving the bus.
- Think of it as being inside of you. Give it permission to be there. Rather than trying to get rid of it or restrict it, envision opening up around it and giving it all the room it needs. Hold it gently, with compassion.
- Observe it in the same way that a curious scientist would observe some new object. What is this object like: liquid, solid, or gas? How big? How heavy? What temperature? What shape? What color?
- Think of it as a cloud on a windy day, or a car driving in front of your house. It is there, but soon, it will simply pass by.
- See it as a broadcast from a doom and gloom radio station. Or a warning from a "don't get killed" machine. Or a pitch from a slick salesperson. Or propaganda from a fascist dictator. It is sending a message, but it is not a balanced message, and it's not always in your best interest to listen.
- If all of these thoughts and feelings were put into a book or movie, what would you call it? Naming your thought or feeling often takes its power away and puts it into a more balanced place.

## How the strategy of acceptance works

Acceptance works by showing us that our thoughts and feelings are often just words, or just opinions, and not necessarily realities. Holding our uncomfortable thoughts and feelings gently, or not taking them so seriously, reduces our need to act on them. The uncomfortable thought or feeling does not go away, but we are free to focus on other things because we are no longer hooked by it.

Here are a couple of examples:

1. You overhear a rumor at work on Friday that there are some layoffs coming. You realize you have been obsessing about the rumor for an entire day.

You remember the acceptance strategy, so now you start to think about your worry as a broadcast from a doom and gloom radio station. You know that the information could be true, but there is also a good chance that it is not. This helps you take the conversation you heard less seriously. You may not completely forget about it, but you do find that you have more energy to enjoy playing softball with your friends in the city league.



2. Your children had some friends over and you made them all lunch. You got distracted and ended up over-cooking something that you served. Later, you heard your daughter apologize to her friends for the food, saying, “I told you my Mom/Dad couldn’t cook.” You not only feel hurt by her comment, but worse, you know that what she said is true. This incident has sent you into a whole cycle of negative self-talk.

To stop the downward spiral, you agree in your mind that you really aren’t a good cook. Once you accept that, you notice that her comment wasn’t a very big deal. You regain perspective and remember that there are a lot of skills a person can have—cooking is only one of them.

## Reflection

Recall an uncomfortable thought you have experienced—maybe something about yourself. Dwell on it for a couple of minutes. Then, switch from thinking about this thought to observing yourself thinking about this thought. Try one of the acceptance methods above: see it as a passenger on your bus, or a cloud in the sky, etc.

What is the uncomfortable thought you brought up?

What happened when you applied an acceptance strategy? Did it increase or reduce your desire to act on the uncomfortable thought?

“Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.”

—Desmond Tutu



# Strategy 3: Committed action

The strategy of committed action is all about taking steps toward the full and productive life we want. This strategy combines elements of both staying present and acceptance, and builds on them. It takes a little planning and set-up on the front end, but from there, we can quickly start to turn tough times and unhelpful thoughts into hidden blessings.

The committed action process has three basic steps:

1. Get clear about what you value in your life.
2. Set some goals in areas that you most want to improve.
3. Take action to move toward your goals mindfully.

## Step 1: Establish your values

Values are like a compass. They are not a destination, but provide *direction* for your life. They guide your actions—how you move through life. A person’s values can be described as answers to deep, fundamental questions, like “What is important to you?” or “What do you stand for?” These are big questions that are not easily answered. Still, we discover some solid, guiding principles when we pause and explore the answers.

One of the great things about your values is that they are freely chosen. No one can tell you what they should be. They are not what you *should* do, *must* do, or *have to* do, but rather what you *choose* to do.

Another thing about values is they do not have to align with your feelings! If you wait for motivation or good feelings to come to you before you act on your values, what you care about may never happen. By the way, did you know that we are generally most miserable when we act in ways that are inconsistent with our values?

Here are a few questions to help you get clear on your values:

### Reflection

Imagine it’s your 100th birthday, and you have continued to live your life exactly as you do now. Complete these sentences:

I spent too much time worrying about...

I would like to have spent more time doing...



As a 100-year-old looking back, I would tell my present self to...

Now, write down what values you have identified that you want to guide your life. Below are some questions to help you think about this. Remember, there are no right or wrong, good or bad answers. What you value is what you value!

What is important to you?

What do you stand for?

What do you want your life to be about?

How do you want to interact with the world and other people?

## Step 2: Define your goals

Once you're clear on your values, take an inventory of your life and see whether you feel like you're generally going in the right direction—living consistently with your values—or missing the mark.

This can be overwhelming—so it might help to break things down and think about your values relative to different areas of your life, such as relationships, work and education, and leisure. You can even score yourself for how consistently you're living with your values in each area—perhaps it's a 4 out of 5 on the work front, but more like a 2 out of 5 in your relationships. If there are some areas where you are currently neglecting your values, it's okay. These gaps are ideal places to focus your time and effort.

Once you've determined what you want to work on, come up with a goal that will help you get closer to living consistently with your values. Many people have been through a goal-setting exercise before, but as a reminder, a good way to think about goals is to make them "SMART":



- **Specific**—Make it specific enough so it is clear what you will do.
- **Measurable**—Make it something that can be easily measured, so you can tell if you've done it.
- **Achievable**—Make sure your goal is achievable, taking into consideration your health, available time, financial status, and skillset.
- **Relevant**—Make your goal consistent with your values and something that helps you improve the quality of your life.
- **Timely**—Make a deadline for your goal to be achieved.

For example, let's say you want to improve your family relationships. A SMART goal could be: *To spend more quality time with my family this year.* This goal is SMART because it's:

- **Specific**—this is a clearly-defined goal
- **Measurable**—you can keep track of how much time you spend with your family each week, or how many activities you do together
- **Achievable**—you can commit to a little bit of time—just 15 minutes—each day, even when busy
- **Relevant**—this is a goal that helps you live by your family values
- **Timely**—you have made this a goal for the year and can look back on your progress when the year is up

Repeat this process for any areas of your life you feel you need to work on. But be gentle on yourself—giving yourself a huge laundry list is going to demoralize you before you even get started. Decide which 2-3 goals you think are most important to get started on first, and then do them!

## Reflection

Answer these questions for each of the 2-3 areas of your life that you most want to improve.

An area of my life that I most want to improve is:

My SMART goal is to:

The values underlying my goal are:



## Step 3: Take action!

Finally, it's time to make the life you want happen. It's time to take action!

Looking at your 2-3 SMART goals, you can now develop an action plan for how you will achieve them. As you do this, think about actions you can take:

- **Immediately**—something small and simple that can be done in the next 24 hours.  
e.g. *I will cook dinner for my wife with my kids tonight.*
- **Short-term**—things you can do over the next few days and weeks.  
e.g. *I'll play a game of cards with my family one evening this week.*
- **Medium-term**—things you can do over the next few weeks and months.  
e.g. *I will take the family to the park one weekend every month.*
- **Long-term**—things you can do over the next few months and years.  
e.g. *I will support my kids with their athletic events by volunteering to coach.*

Taking an immediate step is critical. It builds our hope and confidence when we see results, even if they are just small victories. Getting started, and getting some “quick wins” under our belt, will give us motivation to continue in the right direction (more on that later).

## How the strategy of committed action works

With committed action, we continue to strengthen our pattern of doing things that help us achieve what we really want in life—living more and more consistently with our values. It also helps us respond well to the inevitable challenges that come up in life. We can see and accept that the challenge is there, but then shift our focus to taking the actions that will lead to what we want in the long term.

### Reflection

Again, answer these questions for each of the 2-3 goals you just set.

The actions I will take to achieve my goal are (be specific)...

- Immediate actions:
- Short-term actions:
- Medium-term actions:
- Long-term actions:



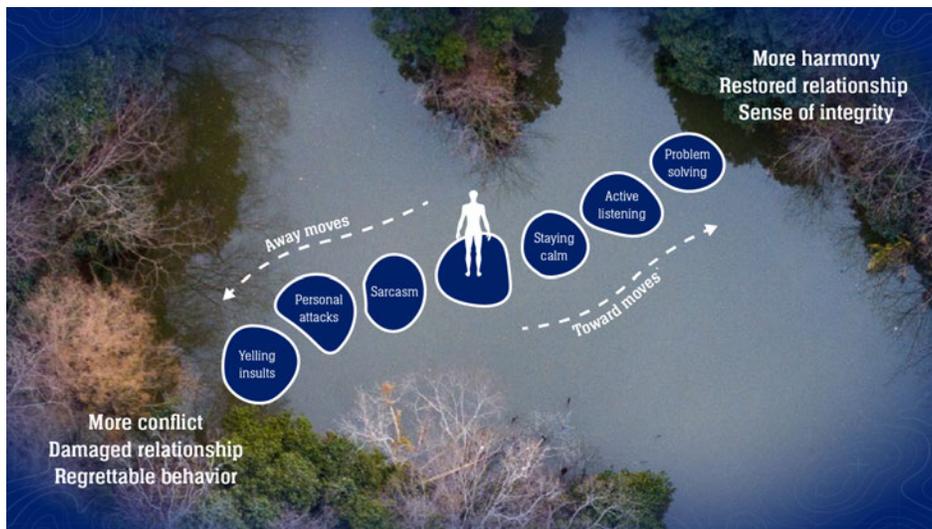
## Toward and away moves

So we've set out goals and developed an action plan—now what? We're unlikely to suddenly devote all of our time and energy to pursuing them. In fact, we'll often catch ourselves acting *against* our own best interests—and it's unrealistic to expect otherwise.

Instead of heaping pressure on ourselves to be perfect, we can think of it this way: anything we do that is consistent with our values we can call a *toward* move, and anything we do that is inconsistent with our values we can call an *away* move.

If we find ourselves doing something that is *not* consistent with our values (an away move)—and we will—we can simply notice it, and stop doing it. Instead, we take an action that is consistent with our values (a toward move).

This is just like we did with the mindfulness exercise earlier—we simply stop the inconsistent action and return to doing one that is consistent with our values. For example, expressing anger in harsh ways may be a signal reminding us that we are doing something that moves us away from our values, so we take note and then act in a way that moves us toward them instead. The more often we practice this switch, the easier it becomes.



# Viewpoint

## Serenity Prayer

God, give us grace to accept with serenity  
the things that cannot be changed,  
Courage to change the things  
which should be changed,  
and the Wisdom to distinguish  
the one from the other.

Living one day at a time,  
Enjoying one moment at a time,  
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,  
Taking, as Jesus did,  
This sinful world as it is,  
Not as I would have it,  
Trusting that You will make all things right,  
If I surrender to Your will,  
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,  
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.  
Amen.

—Reinhold Niebuhr



# Faith Perspective

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.

—[Philippians 4:6-7](#)

There is a lot in life that we can't control. God, however, *is* in control. As the creator of the universe, he has some real power! You can tap into this power just by asking him (praying).

God is not only powerful, but he is also good. When things go wrong, you can trust that God is working out a plan to make them eventually come right. He promises he will take care of you because he loves you—and God always keeps his promises.

This doesn't mean our lives will always be easy or go the way we want them to. They won't. When problems come up, try to see them from God's point of view. Ask yourself, "What is God doing here? What's the bigger picture?" Sometimes God is taking us on a different path to the one we expected. He can see the future; we can't.

Knowing that God loves us, is always with us, and has a plan to protect and provide for us, gives us a peace that is unimaginable to anyone who hasn't experienced it. We feel a sense of confidence and security about our circumstances. As a result, we are far less likely to get upset when things go wrong.

## Reflection

How does trusting God set you free from the need to control the people and circumstances around you?

How does trusting God to make things right allow you to let go of the need to seek justice when someone wrongs you?



# Exercises

## Processing strong emotional reactions

Continue writing down answers for the seven questions from the previous sessions for any incident you become upset, angry, or have a conflict with anyone.

|   |                      |
|---|----------------------|
| Date  |                      |
| 1. What happened?   |                      |
| 2. What emotion(s) did you feel?  |                      |
| 3. What thought(s) created the emotion(s)?                              |                      |
| 4. How big of deal was this?  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 5. How big was your reaction?   | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 6. Why did this bother you so much?                                     |                      |
| 7. How else could you think about it so it wouldn't be such a big deal? |                      |



# Practice Mindfulness

Over the next week, use the mindfulness exercise to practice noticing what your mind is focused on. Is it observing or thinking? If thinking, is it remembering the past or planning for the future?

## Apply Presence, Acceptance, or Committed Action Techniques

Practice applying some of the techniques we've covered in this session by thinking back on a situation from this week, or the past, where you reacted too strongly. Then,

1. Reflect on the situation. Allow yourself to feel tension building up inside of you.
2. Notice any unhelpful thoughts you might be adding to the situation.
3. Apply the strategy of presence, acceptance, or committed action.
4. Notice how this affects your need to change or control the situation and reflect on the results.

Like the "Processing strong emotional reactions" exercise, this helps us unpack how we dealt with challenging situations and visualize better responses. As we practice and those neural pathways get more established, we'll soon be applying these techniques in the moment.

Look at the example below, then use the template on the following page.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Date  | May 5   |
| Situation   | My partner stayed out late with some friends. When they finally got home, I laid into them for not letting me know how late they'd be back, and for keeping me up when I have work tomorrow.  |
| Unhelpful thoughts that I added                             | I'm not going to get to sleep until they get home, which will ruin my day tomorrow. They're all having a great time without me, and I'm missing out. I'm just a loser with no friends who stays at home.  |
| Presence, acceptance, or committed action technique(s) used | Presence—listened to and focused on my breathing for 5 minutes.<br>Acceptance—doom and gloom station tells me if I don't get enough sleep, tomorrow will be a write-off. But that's not necessarily true. I'll probably be fine, and if not, one sub-optimal day won't hurt.<br>Acceptance—I <i>do</i> feel like I'm missing out. But that's just a cloud in the sky. In no time the cloud will have passed and I'll feel less upset. |
| Result  | Felt calmer and got more perspective on the situation. Realized that my reaction was more about my own unhelpful thoughts than my partner's actions. Got out of the negative thought spiral and reminded myself that I do have my own friends and I'm not a loser for missing out on one night.   |



|   |  |
|---|--|
| Date  |  |
| Situation   |  |
| Unhelpful thoughts that I added                             |  |
| Presence, acceptance, or committed action technique(s) used |  |
| Result  |  |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Date  |  |
| Situation   |  |
| Unhelpful thoughts that I added                             |  |
| Presence, acceptance, or committed action technique(s) used |  |
| Result  |  |



# Guidepost



- Unhelpful thoughts like judgement and criticism may be true, but they tend to get in the way of us leading a healthy, productive life.
- Often, we get hooked on unhelpful thoughts and *amplify* them, making ourselves feel worse and more prone to act in harmful ways.
- Mindfulness helps us practice being in a neutral “observing mode,” rather than a “thinking mode” where we’re more likely to criticize, judge, and amplify our unhelpful thoughts.
- Acceptance allows us to be more realistic about the negative situations we cannot change and take our unhelpful thoughts and feelings less seriously.
- Committed action involves establishing our unique values, defining goals to live by those values, and then consistently moving toward those goals rather than away from them.





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# SESSION 7

Handling difficult companions



# The BIG Idea

In the first six sessions, we've focused on ourselves: becoming more aware of what's happening in our own minds, especially when we act in ways that we later regret. By learning how to think differently, we create smaller reactions and feel less compelled to change our circumstances or the people around us. Focusing on ourselves makes sense, because it turns out that we are the only thing we *can* control.

Still, your partner is not perfect. This is true because your partner is human—and therefore flawed, like all of us! In fact, they may be downright difficult at times, contributing a little, or even a lot, to the issues and conflict the two of you face.

In this session, we are going to look at strategies for handling those situations when your partner is being challenging or even downright hurtful. What can, and should, you do about that? How do you get the best relationship outcome while maintaining your integrity?

## What to do with a difficult partner

Every partner will be a difficult partner at times. They will behave in challenging, unfair, and sometimes hurtful ways. The degree to which an individual is a difficult partner varies. Some people are usually easy to get along with, while others can be persistently and significantly challenging.

By now, you should have a pretty good understanding of why people do this. *Hurting people hurt others.* This applies to your partner, as well as you. Everyone carries some emotional baggage. Some of our partners just have a little carry-on, while others are lugging around entire trunks.

What can we do about our loved one's imperfections? Often, we try to change them, but this strategy seldom works, even if we're right and our intentions are good. Nobody wants to be forced to change, and even if they do, the change is unlikely to last!

What's more, attempting to reshape our partner is dangerously close to trying to control them—which is exactly the kind of behavior that we're working to stop. It's far better and more effective to let *them* take the initiative for their own growth.

Let's look at how you can think about and act on the challenges that come up in your relationship with your partner. We've separated these situations into three degrees of difficulty, with some strategies for each.



# Mildly difficult situations

## Annoying differences

Every couple has conflict. We are all wired differently and come into relationships with different expectations, values, traits, and life experiences under our belts. When those differences bump into each other, conflict can often be the result. It is unreasonable to expect otherwise.

Each of us will find some particular personality traits harder to accept, while others won't see those same traits as a problem. Being with someone who tends to go quiet and retreat during conflict might drive *you* up a wall, but another person may find that behavior refreshing. Our annoyance is as much about *us* as it is about our partner. That means it's *within our power* to change how we think and act when conflict happens.

### Reflection

What are some of the conflicts of personality or values that you routinely have with your partner?

Why do these particular issues bother *you* so much? Said another way, why does this bother *you* when it would not necessarily bother someone else?

How can you think about your partner's behavior differently so it does not feel so upsetting?

How can you think about your partner's characteristics more compassionately?



# Unintended hurts

Just because someone's words or actions *feel* hurtful doesn't mean that they are. We frequently misinterpret situations by passing them through our own filters. We get upset because of our own distorted thoughts, rather than the other person being difficult.

Also, be careful not to assign intent. Most of the time, people aren't *trying* to hurt their significant other. They might be preoccupied with their own life, unaware of how their actions affect others, or careless in their choice of words. That's different than them *intentionally* trying to hurt you.

Try to be understanding about whatever is driving your partner's behavior and show them some grace, especially for the small stuff. Tolerance is essential to maintaining any good relationship. You'd want them to do the same for you.

## Reflection

What are some things your partner says or does that feel hurtful to you?

Do you think your partner intends to hurt you, or is this an effect of your own sensitivity?

What might be going on with your partner that would cause them to be unaware of how their words or actions impact you?



## Addressing mildly difficult situations

Note that the above situations are ones that we can handle ourselves. We don't need to address the issue with our partner, but rather can process our thoughts and feelings internally. When we do this, there is no need for discussion—and therefore no opportunity for conflict.

Sometimes, however, we really *do* need to talk with our significant other about the issue. If and when you do, try these strategies:

1. Choose a time to address the issue when both you and your partner have time and are not feeling tired or stressed. Schedule something if necessary.
2. Make sure you are not feeling upset or angry when you talk. If you are, delay the discussion until that feeling has mostly drained away. Explain why you are doing this to your partner, so they don't feel like you're avoiding the issue.
3. Gently share how your partner's words or actions affected you. Use "I" statements and say how you feel without blaming your partner. For example: "I felt unimportant when you said you'd stop at the store and then forgot."
4. Check with them to find out what they meant. Ask—don't assume. For example: "You said you'd rather hire someone to paint the bedroom. The story I'm telling myself is that you don't think I can do it. Is that what you meant?"
5. Listen. Don't interrupt. Don't get defensive—you don't have to agree to hear someone's point of view. Consider using active listening, where you repeat or rephrase what your partner said to make sure you understood correctly: "So what I'm hearing you say is \_\_\_\_\_."
6. Take a time-out (see Session 2) if you need to.

"We live in an imperfect world, and imperfect people surround us every day."

—Joyce Meyer



# Moderately difficult situations

## Misrepresentations and lies

Having a partner misrepresent our words or actions is one of the more difficult situations to handle in a relationship. This is when our loved one takes one thing and twists it into another, blows it out of proportion, or even says an outright lie. For example:

- You were late home for dinner because of traffic, but your partner claims it is evidence that you don't care about them.
- You accidentally backed your spouse's car into a pole, but they accuse you of doing it intentionally.
- You told your partner that you didn't think you could afford a cruise vacation, and now they say you are controlling the money.

You know what they said isn't true, or *fully* true, but you can't help but be upset that they would think that about you! However, if you take the attitude of "that's a lie, I have to make them stop," your reaction will likely get ugly. On the other hand, thinking, "I know that's not true, and I'm sorry they see me that way" generates a much less powerful reaction.

Remember that the accusation probably came from your partner's *own* insecurity—they're likely adding their own distorted thoughts to the situation, just like we do sometimes. Thinking about untrue or unfair accusations in this way will make it much easier for you to stay calm.

## Personal attacks

Perhaps even tougher than misrepresentation is when we feel outright attacked. Personal attacks tend to be about our character and are often based on half-truths. They paint us as all bad, reminding us of our worst traits or biggest mistakes, rather than balancing the bad with the good parts.

Here are some examples:

- "Let's hire someone to mount the TV. The last time you did a handyman project it was a disaster. There's no way I'm going to let you touch this."
- "You're such a loser. Your paycheck doesn't even cover all of our bills. It's pathetic."
- "What an idiotic thing to say! You're stupider than I thought. Crazy and stupid are not a pretty combination."

## Why misrepresentations and personal attacks hurt so much

What is it about misrepresentations and personal attacks that trigger such strong and often damaging reactions? A big clue is in the name. The speaker is attacking who we are as a *person*. This can really challenge how we see and feel about ourselves on a subconscious level—especially when it's coming from someone we love.



Our partners and spouses are supposed to respect, like, and love us, and we want them to show it in their words and actions. Because of this, we give them a lot of power to define who we are and how we see ourselves. When our loved one says something that attacks our character, we think it reflects poorly on us. It must mean that we are bad people.

On the one hand, we don't agree or want that to be true. But on the other hand, we worry that our partner, who likely knows us better than anyone else, might be right. These competing ideas are a form of what's called cognitive dissonance—trying to hold two opposing beliefs in our mind at the same time.

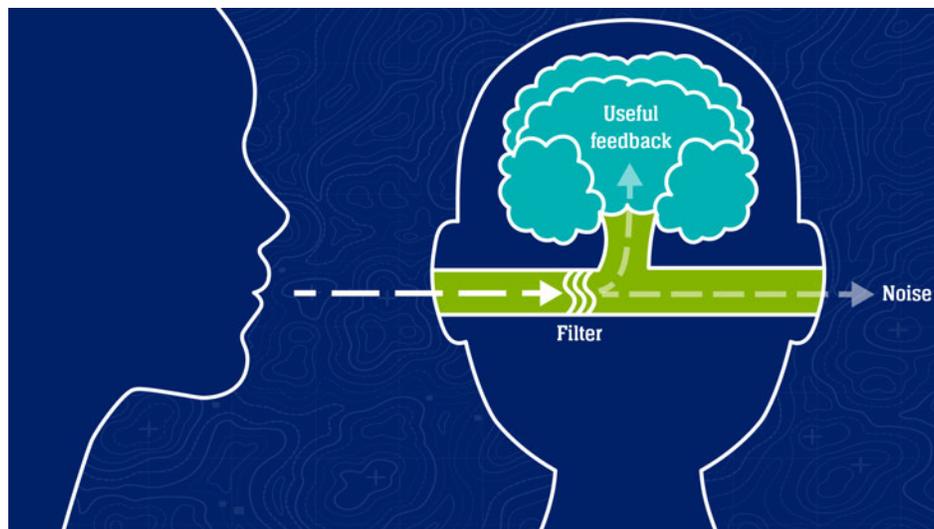
This is where the strong reactions can kick in. We go into defense mode, trying to make our partner stop saying those things or change their mind about us. If we get physical or use damaging words to try to control them, then we've crossed the line into abusive behavior.

## Handling lies and personal attacks

Instead of giving our partners the power to reflect on who we are, we can define it for ourselves. This way, we get to control whether or not our buttons get pushed. It doesn't matter what our partner reflects about us, or whether that reflection is correct or not. We can maintain our sense of peace, regardless of what's happening around us.

Think about what the other person said as just their opinion. Remind yourself that everyone has the right to state their opinion, but it doesn't mean they're correct. You get to choose whether or not you agree with them. For example, if someone tells you that you have purple hair when you don't, you can choose not to believe them. Since it's just their (wrong) opinion, you don't have to correct them. Even the most hurtful attack loses its power when we realize this.

It gets a little harder when there is some truth to a personal attack. How do we respond if our partner hits on something that we *do* want to improve about ourselves? Decide for yourself which parts are true and which parts are not. Consider the true parts as useful feedback and give yourself some grace, even when your partner doesn't. Let the false parts become just noise.



All of this boils down to how we see ourselves. Do we rely on our partner to make us feel good and worthy all the time, and let ourselves get hurt when they don't do that? Or do we have a strong and positive sense of self that comes from inside? This can be hard, especially if we grew up hearing messages that damaged our self-worth or encouraged us to base it on other peoples' opinions. But it's not arrogance to believe we are good, worthy people—it's emotional maturity.

## Reflection

What are some examples of when you partner misrepresented (lied about) your words or actions, or used a personal attack against you?

How can you think about their words differently so they don't sting so much?

Who, or what, do you want to define you and your value?

“Other people's opinions don't matter to me.”

—Marcus Mariota



# Extremely difficult situations

## Mutual abuse

At the extreme end of difficult partners are those whose words and actions could be considered abusive. If you're unsure about what qualifies, check out our webpage on the [definitions](#) of abuse.

Here is a little-known fact: nearly 40% of domestic violence happens in *mutually abusive* relationships. This is where both parties are using violence against each other. That number doesn't count situations where one party is using emotional abuse and the other responds with physical abuse, or when both parties are forms of control and emotional abuse.

## Focus on your part

If you find yourself in this situation, the first thing you can do is to stop contributing your part. The changes you make to *your* actions may positively affect how your *partner* acts. Violence and abuse often happen as the result of escalating tension between two people. Stepping out of your part in the conflict can be what breaks the cycle.

In some way, this is like defensive driving. If you and your partner are crashing into each other in an intersection, one way to prevent this is if one of you stops. It may be annoying that your partner is still running the stop sign, and that may be something the two of you need to discuss and set consequences for, but in the meantime you've avoided a damaging wreck.

By setting an example and working on your own emotional control, you may inspire your partner to do the same. It's important to let them decide that for themselves, however. Don't push them into it. As we said earlier—trying to control others isn't okay, and it doesn't work.

If your partner is unwilling or unable to see their part, you may determine that your life is never going to be free of excessive conflict as long as you stay together. If you are in physical danger, seriously consider removing yourself, at least temporarily, to be safe. If you've been contributing to the harmful behavior between you, however, be careful not to simply blame your partner, end the relationship, and not do the necessary work on yourself.

You may be thinking, "But wait! My partner shouldn't be saying or doing hurtful things." Of course this is true. However, the danger in dwelling on your partner's role in the conflict is that it's easy to lose focus on your *own* part. By focusing on your own actions and healing, you're concentrating on the *one* and only part of the relationship you can control. It's the only hope any of us have to improve our lives.

## Practice, practice, practice

Regardless of whether your partner is mildly, moderately, or severely challenging, think of their deficiencies as opportunities to practice improving your emotional control. Make it your goal to respond to your partner in the most constructive and compassionate way possible. Having the ability to respond well to a difficult partner, or any other challenging person for that matter, is a badge of honor worth seeking.



Any action that could hurt your loved one emotionally or physically, even in return for something they've done to hurt you, is never a good response and accomplishes nothing. It's fine to defend yourself, but not to retaliate or escalate the conflict. Two wrongs don't make a right.

There are always better, more productive responses than getting even. Those responses require good emotional control so we don't just react, but rather stop and think through the best way forward. Practice planning your words and actions to get the results you really want: a loving and harm-free relationship.

As you'll see in the next section on boundaries, being able to remain calm and avoid getting defensive or escalating the conflict will maximize your leverage with your partner, even in very difficult situations.

## Reflection

What is something your partner says or does that frequently turns into a conflict?

How can you respond to your partner in the most constructive and compassionate way possible when they say or do this?



# Viewpoint

## Accepting Differences

We often wish that others were different than they are—usually we want them to be more like us. And it is okay to try to influence them in kind, positive ways. Problems surface when we become self-righteous, angry, nagging, or controlling in order to pressure them to change, rather than accepting their differences.

Diversity is a good thing, as it makes the world a much more fascinating place. We learn more about the world and ourselves in the process, which helps us grow. In intimate relationships, our partner's unique and *different* perspective and skills helps eliminate our own blind spots and complement our weaknesses.

To feel comfortable with people who are different from us, we must first accept *ourselves* for who we are. Unfortunately, we often put guards up to protect ourselves, instead of being open to those differences and to interacting with people who are different from us.

Behind all this, there is often a fear or false belief that others' viewpoints and opinions might somehow make our own opinions worthless. This is not true. Those who are different from us have their own experiences and opinions, but that *in no way* invalidates our own. Someone may influence us, but we always get to choose whether or not to change our point of view. This comes back to the idea of boundaries again.

To become more accepting other people's differences, including your significant other's, be aware of your fears. Challenge these thoughts to clear your mind so you can better understand and appreciate those differences. Take time to get to know the other person by really listening to them, rather than relying on a quick judgment.

Acceptance is a gift that gives back. Consider how much you like it when you feel accepted. Imagine how it might improve your relationship with someone if that person felt you accepted them fully. Decide to treat them with the same degree of respect that you would like to be treated—it's just good karma.



# Faith Perspective

Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.

—[Romans 12:18](#)

God wants us to be blessed by our relationships, including those we have with our partner, extended family, friends, neighbors, and even the strangers we encounter. He *created* us to live in a community and experience love, friendship, and fellowship.

As the maker of all these things, he also tells us how we can get the most out of our relationships. His instructions are a lot like the use and maintenance manual we get from the manufacturer when we buy a car. He explains how we can take care of our relationships so they last.

God not only says “Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone,” but also gives us several specific actions we can take to protect and preserve our connections to others. In the chapter from which the above quote is taken, God calls us to be humble, accept differences, love genuinely, be patient, show compassion, give generously, forgive, honor, serve, and not seek revenge when we feel wronged.

Some of us may wonder if God made all these rules to take the fun out of life. In reality, it is just the opposite. He is telling us how we can get the *most* joy out of life, including from our interactions with others. Getting to know God and following his commands is not a burden—it’s a blessing.

## Reflection

Do you feel at peace with everyone you know? Why or why not?

Who do you have the most difficulty in getting along with? Why?

In the list of things to do (be humble, accept differences, love genuinely, be patient, show compassion, give generously, forgive, honor, serve, and not seek revenge), which ones do you do well? Which ones could you do better?



# Exercises

## Processing strong emotional reactions

Continue writing down answers for the seven questions from the last session for any incident you become upset, angry, or have a conflict with anyone.

|   |                      |
|---|----------------------|
| Date  |                      |
| 1. What happened?   |                      |
| 2. What emotion(s) did you feel?  |                      |
| 3. What thought(s) created the emotion(s)?                              |                      |
| 4. How big of deal was this?  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 5. How big was your reaction?   | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 6. Why did this bother you so much?                                     |                      |
| 7. How else could you think about it so it wouldn't be such a big deal? |                      |



# Apply Presence, Acceptance, or Committed Action Techniques

Continue practicing the techniques you learned last week when you experience challenging situations with your partner.

1. Think of a situation from this week, or from the past, where you reacted too strongly.
2. Reflect on the situation. Allow yourself to feel tension building up inside of you.
3. Notice any unhelpful thoughts you might be adding to the situation.
4. Apply the strategy of presence, acceptance, or committed action.
5. Notice how this affects your need to change or control the situation.

Reflect on the results when you applied one of these techniques to a difficult situation.

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Date  |  |
| Situation   |  |
| Unhelpful thoughts that I added                             |  |
| Presence, acceptance, or committed action technique(s) used |  |
| Result  |  |



# Guidepost



- Every partner will be a difficult at times because every partner is flawed—like us. Our job is to navigate those inevitable challenges with the same grace we’d like in return.
- Personality differences between us and our partner can be annoying, but those annoyances are as much about us as they are about our partner. Determine how to think differently about those differences so they don’t bother you so much.
- Sometimes we’ll feel hurt even though no hurt was intended. Often this is because of our own distorted thinking rather than anything the other person did wrong.
- Misrepresentations, lies, and personal attacks are difficult situations to handle. Remind yourself that those words likely came from your partner’s own hurt. It’s okay to disagree, but often there’s no need to defend yourself simply because they said something that’s untrue or unfair.
- If you’re in a mutually abusive relationship, be sure to clean up your side of the street first and let your partner know their harmful behavior is not okay. If your partner does not change their actions, you’ll need to make the difficult decision about staying in that relationship.





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**SESSION 8**

Respecting boundaries



# The BIG Idea

One of the best ways we can think about difficult partners and determine how we are going to best respond to them is by using the concept of boundaries. In fact, this principle can help us manage all our relationships better.

## Boundaries

### Principles of relationship boundaries

A great concept to keep in mind when dealing with a difficult partner is the idea of relationship boundaries. Relationship boundaries are like property boundaries. You don't have to paint your house blue just because someone else told you to. Similarly, you do not have the right to choose their patio tiles. Your domain ends at the property line, where theirs starts.

In a relationship, having boundaries means recognizing that we are separate people from our partner, with different wants, needs, thoughts, and feelings. You are in control of you. You don't get to make your thoughts, feelings, or actions your partner's responsibility. Also, you can (and should) listen to your partner—and others—but ultimately, you get to decide for yourself what's best for you.

In the same way, your partner is in control of themselves. They don't get to make their thoughts, feelings, or actions your problem. Likewise, you can try to inform or influence them, but they get to decide what's best for themselves. This concept is captured perfectly by the kid who tells their older sibling, "You are *not* the boss of me!"

### What do healthy relationship boundaries look like?

If we have good relationship boundaries, the following will likely be true:

- We each have friends outside of the relationship.
- We each have our own interests and hobbies outside of the things we like to do together.
- We weigh in on each other's choices, but don't try to decide for one another.
- We each respect our partner's differences.
- We ask for what we need and want, but accept that our partner might not always give it.
- We do nice things for our partner without expecting them to return the favor, and vice-versa.
- We're able to accept and move on from a relationship if it comes to an end.

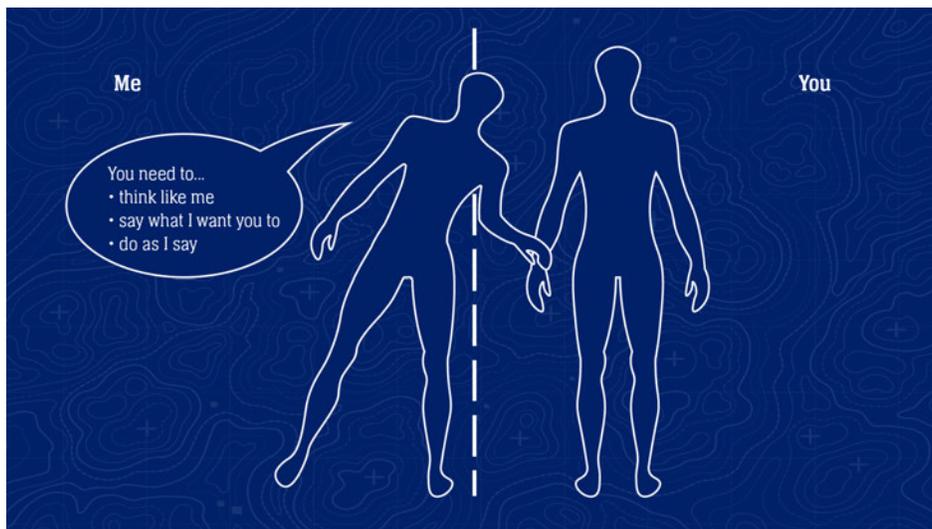
For many people, the idea of having *boundaries* in a relationship can feel uncomfortable. For one, it can feel like how we experience our relationship is out of our control. The idea that we have to accept that our partner might not give us what we ask for is scary. And, we may need to let go of the false narrative that a good relationship means that our partner will anticipate and meet all of our needs.



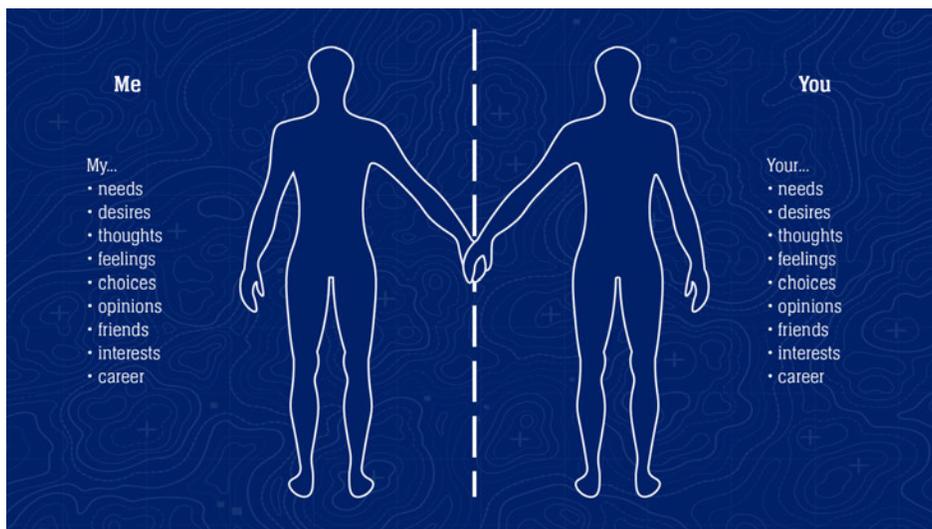
## The problem with unhealthy relationship boundaries

Ever let someone lean on you while they put their shoe on? It's a nice favor to do for them, but if they lean on you for a full half-hour, you'll probably soon feel pretty fed up. And if you move even slightly before they're done, they'll lose their balance and fall.

This is a good metaphor for what happens when we need our partner to think, talk, or act a certain way for us to be okay. We're leaning on them for our own sense of balance—and it's not sustainable. They'll never get it exactly right and they'll soon become resentful, especially if we try to *make* them take care of our needs. We're only setting ourselves up for disappointment and conflict when we give away our power to make ourselves feel better.



Compare the above diagrams to the one below, with the two people standing upright. In the one below, they're still close, but they're standing solidly on their own two feet. If either moves, it does not affect the other. As scary as it feels to allow our mate to do as they please, it's the only way to have a relationship that works well.



## Where do unhealthy relationship boundaries come from?

Healthy relationship boundaries are a result of having a good sense of personal security and self-esteem, which we develop early in life. Like we discussed in Session 5, certain childhood experiences can leave us with a weak sense of safety, identity, and self-worth. As a result, we end up with a poor sense of boundaries.

Some of us feel like we “need” our loved one to say or do certain things in order for us to maintain our sense of stability. If they think, talk, or act differently than we want, we feel off-balance or even angry. In response to our discomfort, we try to bring them back into line. In other words, we try to control them so we can feel safe and secure again. This coping method may seem to work in the moment, but it’s a terrible habit that will only result in disappointment, resentment, or worse.

Others of us allow our loved ones to disrespect our boundaries and make their problems our problem because we “need” the relationship to feel secure. We don’t say “no” to unacceptable behavior because we’re too afraid of losing our connection with that person. Being alone triggers terrible anxiety and we feel unlovable.

Notice that in both of these cases, the key word is *need*. Needing our partner to behave in certain ways, or needing to be in a relationship to feel okay, set us up for trouble. In contrast, having a solid sense of self-esteem frees us to *want* a relationship, and fully enjoy the blessings it brings.

## How to stop overstepping your boundaries

When your partner is doing something you don’t like, what *do* you do? How do you stop your mate from doing something that hurts you? Boundaries provide us a good solution.

Start by simply recognizing what is in your domain and what is outside of it. It’s actually very liberating to realize that there is only *one thing* that we have the ability—and responsibility—to control: ourselves. The popular saying “not my circus, not my monkeys” captures this perfectly.

When annoyed by another person and tempted to control or change them, brainstorm how you can think about the situation differently. Often, we realize that we’re not as affected by their poor choices as we think we are. Here are a couple of examples:

- Your wife uses social media to air petty complaints about your kid’s school. You advise her that she may be damaging her reputation, but she ignores your warning. She may sound ridiculous, but you realize that it doesn’t really reflect on you—you don’t need to be embarrassed.
- You are afraid that your husband will have an affair. If he does, that will make *him* a cheater, but it says nothing about you. You can end your marriage if it happens, but you don’t have to prevent him from making the mistake.

## What to do when someone oversteps your boundaries

Does this mean that you just have to suck it up and let your partner (or neighbor or boss, for that matter) walk all over you? Absolutely not! You’re not doing the other person any favors by tolerating, and therefore enabling, bad behavior. And you’re certainly not taking good care of yourself by putting up with treatment that is unacceptable.



The key is to take *reasonable* and *appropriate* actions in response. If your neighbor's party got too loud, you could politely ask them to keep it down. You can even file a noise complaint if they chose to ignore your request. But it would never be reasonable or appropriate to respond by, say, punching them in the face. That would only put the focus on your poor self-control and make it too easy for them, and everyone else, to miss what started it.

Similarly, when your partner crosses a line that you find unacceptable, you can ask them to stop. If they continue, it is absolutely appropriate to create natural consequences. However, the severity of these consequences should be *appropriate* for the severity of the offense.

Perhaps your partner yelling at you or calling you names prompts you to take a time-out and return to the conversation when they calm down. If they're physically violent, you may leave and only consider reuniting if and when you're sure they've permanently changed their behavior. If the behavior persists and they refuse to change, you always have the option to end the relationship.

What we should *never* do is retaliate by "giving them a taste of their own medicine" or resorting to dirty fighting or violence. We often think in the moment that these strategies will work, but they never yield the good, long-term results that we really want. Taking the high road maximizes the pressure we put on them to change. Note this strategy doesn't guarantee it, but it gives us better odds for the best possible outcome.

## Creating healthy relationship boundaries is hard

Establishing good relationship boundaries is easier said than done. It takes some time to decide what is reasonable and appropriate.

One common mistake is being too soft. We may question ourselves—are we being too sensitive or intolerant? Our partner may push back and claim that we are being unreasonable, adding to our doubt.

If we're not firm and consistent about boundaries in our relationship, even under pressure, we communicate that we are not serious about them. It helps to talk to someone we trust, such as a friend, counselor, or pastor to get a more objective viewpoint. Once we arrive at an appropriate response, we must stick with it.

That said, using boundaries as a weapon against our partner is another trap—especially for small violations. We can't expect our partner to be perfect all the time. Yelling at the neighbor's kids to get off our lawn is within our legal rights, but it won't earn us any relationship points.

Don't fall into the trap of thinking that you should simply shut everyone and everything out and only look after yourself, either. That's not the answer. After all, a property is best enjoyed when you invite people over as your guests.

## More about boundaries

The concept of relationship boundaries can be difficult to grasp, and as we've discussed, hard to implement. Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend have probably done the best job of making boundaries understandable through their bestselling book, [Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No To Take Control of Your Life](#). You can also find more resources they've created around this subject on their [website](#).



## Reflection

What, if any, boundary issues have you experienced in your relationships?

Do you think you need to do better in respecting your partner's boundaries, maintaining your own boundaries when they overstep yours, or both?

Who do you know that could help you determine a reasonable and appropriate response to your partner's bad behavior?

“Daring to set boundaries is about having the courage to love ourselves, even when we risk disappointing others.

—Brené Brown



# Viewpoint

## Jealousy

Jealousy is a normal human emotion. It even has a good purpose—to protect relationships we care about. Jealousy is also a common emotion, one we see portrayed in movies, on TV, and in the dramas played out in many people’s lives.

Just because it’s common, however, doesn’t mean it’s always healthy. Too much jealousy, especially the unfounded kind, hurts our relationships.

Going through your partner’s phone, mail, emails, or social media accounts without his or her permission is not okay. Incessant questioning about where they were or who they were with, accusing them of giving attention to others, or checking up on them is going to feel controlling.

Similarly, doing something that might prevent them from going out, like taking their car keys, money, or clothing will violate their sense of being an individual, free to make their own choices.

In a healthy relationship, both individuals should encourage each other to have outside friends of any gender. It’s good to talk to your partner and agree on what boundaries might constitute cheating, but not allowing harmless interactions is showing you that you don’t trust your partner, which damages your relationship with them.

If you are worried about your partner’s faithfulness, talk with them about how you feel. Approach it as a conversation rather than an accusation.

What if you still *feel* jealous, even though your partner has given you no reason to distrust them? Use that feeling as an opportunity to look at what’s going on behind the scenes.

Jealousy is typically a fear of loss. With persistent and unjustifiable jealousy, we have an exaggerated fear of being hurt by being rejected or abandoned, even if that’s not really the case. Peeling our thought layers back further, we often see the root cause of jealousy is insecurity.

Before you act on jealous feelings, remember that your thoughts may be quite different than reality—a case of distorted thinking.

One strategy is to consider the worst-case scenario. What if your partner really *is* cheating on you? Remind yourself that you can get by without your partner, even if that’s not the outcome you want. See your partner as a nice addition to your life, but not an essential one. See yourself as enough—desirable enough, good enough, worthy enough of your partner being in a relationship with you.

The more confident you are to handle these negative thoughts and situations, the more you’ll allow yourself to trust your partner without experiencing jealousy. From there, you’ll be able to build trust and negotiate reasonable expectations for your relationship.

“No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.”

—Eleanor Roosevelt



# Faith Perspective

Jesus replied, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? As for you, follow me.”

—[John 21:22](#)

In this passage, Peter asks Jesus how John, another one of his disciples, will die. Peter knows that Jesus is God, and that he likely has the answer to this question. Jesus’ reply isn’t quite what Peter has in mind, but it *is* full of wisdom and great guidance—not only for Peter, but for us, too. “*What is that to you? As for you, follow me.*”

In other words, don’t trouble yourself with how God sees others, or what plans he may or may not have for them. Instead, we are simply to focus on following him. That means that when we encounter people that are doing wrong, it doesn’t need to concern us. God will work with them in his own way and in his own time. In modern language, Jesus is saying “maintain boundaries.”

A lot of Christians get this wrong sometimes. Our human nature can be quick to judge and point out others’ mistakes. Maybe you’ve been on the receiving end of someone else’s judgment, and it’s not fun. Remember, our purpose is not to judge others—that’s God’s job.

What God wants us to do is focus on ourselves, *our* words, and *our* deeds. Our job is to try to model our actions as closely as we can on those of Jesus. We are to follow him.

## Reflection

When you compare yourself to others, how do you think you “stack up” with regard to being a good person?

Have you ever felt judged by other people?

How freeing would it feel to focus on following Jesus rather than worrying about what others are doing wrong?



# Exercises

## Processing strong emotional reactions

Continue writing down answers for the seven questions from the last session for any incident you become upset, angry, or have a conflict with anyone.

|   |                      |
|---|----------------------|
| Date  |                      |
| 1. What happened?   |                      |
| 2. What emotion(s) did you feel?  |                      |
| 3. What thoughts created the emotion?                                   |                      |
| 4. How big of deal was this?  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 5. How big was your reaction?   | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 6. Why did this bother you so much?                                     |                      |
| 7. How else could you think about it so it wouldn't be such a big deal? |                      |



# Applying Presence, Acceptance, or Committed Action Techniques

Continue practicing the techniques you learned last week when you experience challenging situations with your partner.

- 1. Think of a situation from this week, or from the past, where you reacted too strongly.
- 2. Reflect on the situation. Allow yourself to feel tension building up inside of you.
- 3. Notice any unhelpful thoughts you might be adding to the situation.
- 4. Apply the strategy of presence, acceptance, or committed action.
- 5. Notice how this affects your need to change or control the situation.

Reflect on the results when you applied one of these techniques to a difficult situation.

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Date  |  |
| Situation   |  |
| Unhelpful thoughts that I added                             |  |
| Presence, acceptance, or committed action technique(s) used |  |
| Result  |  |



# Guidepost



- Relationship boundaries are like property boundaries. You are in control of, and responsible for, *you*. Others are in control of, and responsible for, *themselves*. You can try to inform or influence others, but they get to decide what's best for them. They can try to inform or influence you, but you decide what's best for you.
- In a healthy relationship, each partner allows—even better, *encourages*—the other to have different friendships and interests, and to make some decisions independently.
- *Needing* our partner to say or do certain things for us to maintain our sense of stability and self-esteem is unhealthy and unsustainable. Meeting our own needs frees us to *want* a relationship.
- If our partner crosses a line that we find unacceptable, we should ask them to stop. If they continue, we can take reasonable and appropriate action such as distancing ourselves from them. Responding “in kind” or forcing them to change are *not* okay.
- Establishing and maintaining good relationship boundaries is hard. Talk to someone you trust to get an objective viewpoint of what's reasonable and appropriate, then be firm and consistent with what you'll allow on your property.





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**SESSION 9**

Survival skills



# The BIG Idea

Communication. It's how we connect with others, solve problems, and get our needs met. While communication is key for any healthy relationship, it's also one of the first areas where difficulties can crop up.

There are enough books on communication to fill entire libraries, so this is a topic that's way bigger than we can cover in this Guidebook. We are, however, going to focus on a few problem areas that can have a big impact on how you and your partner communicate with each other. Then, we'll cover some techniques that can make a big difference in the quality and harmony of your relationship.

## Communication problems

### When emotions hijack communication

Ever had what was meant to be an easy conversation turn into a difficult one? Sometimes, we think our relationship is just suffering from communication problems. Or, we believe that we and our partner simply need better conflict resolution tools.

However, while these skills are essential to any healthy relationship, we'll never be able to apply them in the heat of the moment if we don't have good emotional control. That's why this Guidebook has focused on better understanding and managing our emotions. Only when we have a handle on those feelings—especially big ones like fear and anxiety that tend to hijack our brains—will we be able to communicate effectively.

#### *The issue beneath the issue*

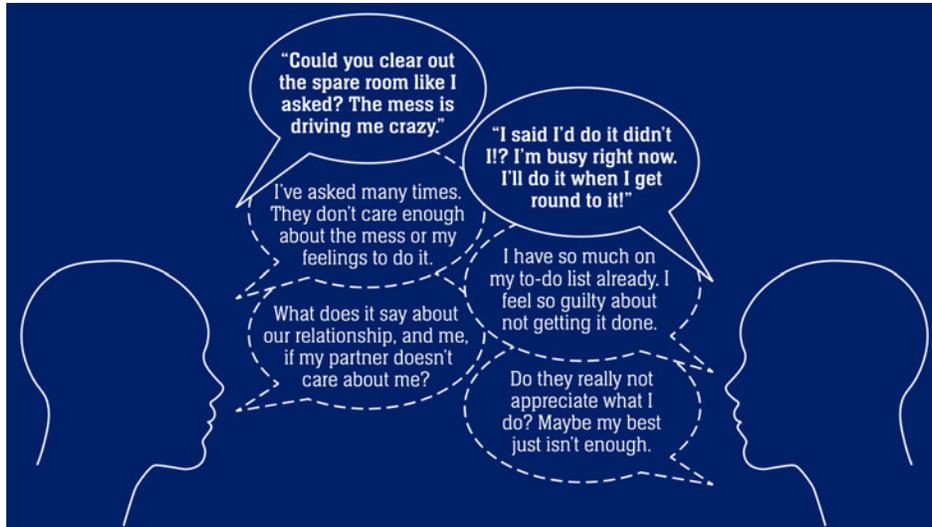
Often, the topic of the conversation itself is not really the cause of the conflict—it's just the surface issue. Rather, it's the underlying story we're telling ourselves about the situation that creates those big emotions.

Here's an example. Let's say your partner reminds you to do a project around the house. If you find yourself getting defensive or angry at this request, that reaction is probably not about the project or even the reminder. Rather, it may be because you feel overwhelmed by everything you already have on your list, inadequate for not getting through it, unappreciated by your partner for all you do, or even afraid they are disappointed in you.

In turn, your partner might react to your defensiveness. They may feel their requests are being ignored, that we are disrespecting them, or that they are powerless to change the situation. These emotions may start affecting how they communicate. Soon, you both are pouring gasoline on the fire.

Now, the discussion is no longer about the house project. Instead, it's about whether each of you is worthy of consideration or respect—two much bigger and more emotionally-charged subjects. This is why we “fight like our life depends on it” over things that, to outsiders, appear meaningless.





### Keeping communication on track

How can we keep conversations like this from getting so far off-track?

Notice when your emotions are affecting your communication and take a time-out. As you pause, ask yourself what's going on inside of you that's creating all this emotional energy. Do your feelings reflect reality, or were they generated by distorted self-talk? By identifying these thoughts and feelings, then soothing yourself, you have a chance of keeping the conversation on track.

Also, recognize that your partner may have had *their* buttons pushed, too. Taking a time-out can help you *both* regain perspective and allow the emotional energy to drain away. Asking your better half about their thoughts and emotions may help them identify what's happening below the surface in their own minds. It also gives you a chance to show you care about their feelings while clearing up any distorted thoughts that might be in the story they are telling themselves.

Once the distorted thinking is removed and over-sized emotions are cooled, you and your partner will both be in a better spot to use the good communication skills that you've learned.

### Reflection

What is a topic that you and your partner, or a former partner, have had difficulty communicating about?



What underlying story might you be telling yourself that creates distorted thoughts about this subject? Is your partner perhaps telling themselves a story that creates distorted thoughts for them?

What's a more accurate story you could tell yourself that would not create such strong emotions?

## The silent treatment: stonewalling

As we covered in Session 2, taking a time-out and walking away from an argument is a great strategy when emotions are escalating. This pause allows us to rein in our feelings and think through how to best solve the problem.

However, avoiding the issue for days or weeks, or even permanently, is called stonewalling—and this behavior can be as damaging as if we stayed and engaged in the conflict. What's the difference between taking a time-out and stonewalling?

### *Stonewalling vs. time-outs*

A time-out, when done right, includes communicating to our partner that we need a little while to calm down. This helps reassure our mate that the topic and their voice are important to us, so they don't misread our actions. Then, after our emotions drain away, we return to the conversation as soon as it is practical.

On the other hand, stonewalling is when one partner stops communicating with the other and becomes emotionally unavailable—as if a stone wall has been put between them. Rather than taking a temporary time-out to cool off, stonewalling means disengaging and not returning to discuss the issue later.

A person can stonewall by physically leaving the scene or just sitting silently without responding. It can also take the form of avoiding conversations or problems by being uncooperative and shutting down. Stonewalling even includes dismissing everything the other person says as boring, unreasonable, or unimportant as a reason to not participate.



## *The causes and effects of stonewalling*

Stonewalling may be a bad habit left over from our childhood—something we did to protect ourselves, get attention, or express anger. However, continuing those patterns in our adult relationships no longer serves us well.

It's often a defense mechanism we use to suppress negative emotions like fear or shame. We may feel inadequate about our ability to communicate, or about something related to the issue. Then, we try to control the situation and avoid our uncomfortable feelings by steering clear of the conflict.

Stonewalling can leave our partner feeling angry, hurt, abandoned, and rejected when we withdraw. They will likely feel unheard, worthless, powerless, and hopeless. Those emotions erode a person's self-worth and can leave them feeling depressed as we continually shut them out.

They may escalate—to a level of desperation—in an attempt to engage us in conversation or to feel heard. Or, they may try to stonewall back. This is not proof that avoiding conflict was our best move. It's evidence that we are damaging their well-being.

## *Stopping stonewalling*

What can you do to stop stonewalling? The first step is to recognize it and commit to changing your response. When you begin to feel frustrated and angry, use calming techniques like deep breathing or taking a time-out. Ask yourself, "What's so scary about this conversation (or conflict) for me?"

Once you realize you're reacting to past hurts or exaggerated fears, you can free yourself from your distorted thoughts and self-soothe to keep powerful negative emotions from hijacking your behavior. Working with a counselor is particularly helpful in identifying and healing from these core issues.

When you're calmer, push yourself to go back to the conversation. If you're not confident with your communication skills, work to improve them. It's just like any other skill you can learn and improve.

### Reflection

Have you caught yourself stonewalling to avoid a conflict or to win an argument?

If so, which negative emotions might you be trying to avoid by stonewalling?

What steps can you take to change your response?



# Intimidation

## *What is intimidating behavior?*

Intimidating behavior is any behavior that would reasonably cause a person to fear injury or harm. Any action that is out-of-proportion, aggressive, or violent, even if it is not directed at anyone in particular, can cause intimidation. It's using force that is beyond what is justified to defend ourselves. Intimidation does not serve any good purpose in your relationships.

Here are some examples of potentially intimidating behavior:

- Raising your voice
- Pounding your fist
- Kicking objects
- Slamming doors
- Throwing things
- Leering looks
- Towering over someone
- Friendly-looking touches that are actually painful
- Directly or indirectly threatening to hurt someone
- Exhibiting a weapon

The last two qualify as criminal assault and could land you in legal trouble.

## *Effects of intimidating behavior*

For those of us who have been violent with our partners but are trying to change, recognizing and stopping intimidating behavior is very important. It's likely our mate will feel threatened easily, especially if they've been on the receiving end of our aggression in the past. Intimidating behavior will make it impossible for us to have a trusting, close, or loving relationship with them.

For many of us, intimidating behavior is not intentional—we experience it more as a release of frustration. We may be unaware that we're intimidating others until someone points it out to us. But we all have a responsibility to act in a way that does not create fear in those around us. This of course applies not only in intimate partnerships, but also in the workplace and social situations.

Sometimes we *are* intentional about intimidation—we know it will help us get our way. This is a terrible long-term game plan. When a person feels intimidated, they are likely to withdraw—and our relationship with them suffers. It creates a tense atmosphere of anger and resentment. All of this is counter-productive to what we really want: a close, loving, harmonious relationship.

Regardless of whether intimidating behavior is subconscious or intentional, our actions end up hurting us. People quickly see our tactics and actively work to neutralize us. We end up facing their resistance, whether we're using the bad behavior or not, just based on our reputation of intimidation.

## *Why we use intimidating behavior*

Think about a cat with its back arched and hair standing up. What the cat is trying to do is scare or intimidate whatever creature or object it just encountered. The cat's behavior, however, is driven by its own fear of that same item.



That's like what's really going on when we use intimidating behavior. We may not be aware of it, and we may just think we're frustrated, but chances are deeper down we're feeling threatened in some way. We believe that if this person doesn't back down or give in, our wellbeing is going to be compromised—so we lash out.

We try to get them to change their thoughts, words, and actions by intimidating them. This isn't necessarily a planned strategy, but a subconscious one conjured up in our mind. It also isn't a good or effective plan, but simply a desperate and dysfunctional attempt at self-protection.

### *How to stop intimidating your partner*

Recognize intimidating behavior when it starts. Keep an eye out for some of the less severe behaviors like yelling, or better yet, physical signs you're getting upset, like your body getting tense during an argument. Like we covered in Session 2, these are warning signs to prompt you take a time-out and get curious about why you're feeling threatened.

#### Reflection

Have you caught yourself using intimidation in a conflict or to win an argument?

If so, what deeper motivation, such as self-protection or needing to control your surroundings, might be driving your intimidation?

What steps can you take to change your behavior?

“You can accomplish by kindness what you cannot by force.”

—Publilius Syrus



# Dirty fighting

Every couple fights. And fighting, by definition, is messy—otherwise it wouldn't be called a fight. However, certain actions are so damaging for a relationship that they poison it, driving an emotional wedge between you and your partner. These actions are called dirty fighting.

## *What is dirty fighting?*

Strange as it sounds, conflict can be good. Partners who argue productively and maintain respect for each other during their arguments can create a formidable bond. Handling disputes in a healthy way can turn you and your partner into a powerful, supportive, and innovative problem-solving team.

In contrast, when we use a win-at-all-costs strategy at the expense of our partner, it takes a terrible toll on the relationship. These lose-lose battles create a deepening resentment that becomes harder to overcome with time. In general, dirty fighting techniques cause our partners to feel too guilty, confused, overwhelmed, or worn out to continue asking for what they truly need and want.

Dirty fighting is often subconscious behavior that is learned in childhood and continues into adult relationships. And as with stonewalling and intimidation, many people are not even aware they are doing anything wrong or hurtful when they fight this way. They may recognize that they are having difficulty resolving conflicts in their relationships, but they don't make the link to *how* they engage in those conflicts.

## *Forms of dirty fighting*

Stonewalling and intimidation are themselves forms of dirty fighting. Here are nine additional types, and the reasons why they hurt your partner and your relationship. As you look at the list, see if you recognize yourself in any of these behaviors:

1. **Chasing.** Chasing is the opposite of stonewalling. It is getting in our partner's space and forcing the discussion even if they are not ready to talk. If your partner is withdrawing, it is likely that they feel attacked or need time to collect their thoughts. Pressuring them into a conversation has no hope of ending well.
2. **Invalidation.** When feeling attacked, we'll sometimes dismiss our partner's feelings or say there is no reason for them to feel that way. Since we can never know another person's internal experiences, that's a ridiculous claim. Invalidating our partner's emotions says we don't value them or care about their world, and we seriously damage the relationship in the process.
3. **Escalation.** Most people don't like conflict, and especially don't like to be yelled at, intimidated, or scared. If we use these techniques to turn a small disagreement into an all-out fight, our partner will likely disengage to avoid our tirade. We might think we've won, but the long-term effect of not being heard in a relationship kills our partner's love.
4. **Piling on.** Piling on happens when we rehash the past or drag other problems into the argument. By bringing all these additional issues into the conflict, we just confuse (and often escalate) the one at hand. It's easy for our mates to feel overloaded and hopeless in resolving the initial issue.
5. **Generalization.** Avoid absolute words like "you always" or "you never." Nobody is "always" or "never" anything, and using these words will just inflame the argument. Instead, use specific examples to make a point.



6. **Character assassination.** One terrible dirty fighting technique is going after our partner's flaws. Instead focusing on the issue, we attack their character or personality, or remind them of their past mistakes. How can we expect our partners to love, care for, and respect us when we demoralize and demean them?
7. **Hitting below the belt.** As we get to know another person, we often discover areas where they are particularly sensitive. Like a character assassination, using another's deepest vulnerabilities to win an argument creates painful wounds. None of us will feel affection for a person whose words hurt or shame us, which is why this form of dirty fighting is so counter-productive.
8. **Martyrdom.** One strategy to win a fight is to beat ourselves up for what we did wrong, then blame our partner for how badly we feel. We blow our partner's complaint or accusation out of proportion so they feel guilty and back down. Frequently using this technique discourages our partners from voicing legitimate complaints, leaves them feeling powerless, and encourages them to leave.
9. **Threats of abandonment.** Threats of abandonment make our partner feel insecure and fearful of loss. We may verbally threaten to leave, or simply walk out without promising to return. Like the silent treatment, the message our partners receive is they must give in or suffer the loss of the relationship.

### *Stopping dirty fighting*

Eliminating dirty fighting is vital for a respectful, loving relationship. Here are ten ways to engage in "healthy fighting" instead:

1. **Get some perspective.** It's easy to lose sight of the big picture during a conflict. Remind yourself that your relationship is more important than the issue at hand. Remember what you love about your partner and the good moments you've shared.
2. **Apologize quickly, even if you're right.** Apologizing is often difficult because our pride says we are right—which may or may not be true. Yet apologizing is the simplest and most effective thing we can do to put the brakes on an escalating conflict. At the very least, we can simply apologize for arguing, assuring our partner that we value them and our relationship.
3. **Drop your defenses.** Not defending ourselves feels scary but being defensive usually triggers defensiveness in our partner. If your partner is upset with you or offers criticism, try to just listen and see it as an opportunity to learn about yourself. You still get to decide if their words are true or not, but you don't need to correct them or convince them that they are wrong.
4. **Don't take it personally.** One reason why we don't need to be defensive is because a lot of issues are not really about us. Even when someone is upset and attacking you, their emotion is often really about their *own* fears, insecurities, or distorted thinking. Not taking their words personally makes it easier to listen and show compassion for our partner, which really defuses an argument.
5. **Avoid the need for mind-reading.** Expecting our partner to understand our desires without saying them out loud is unrealistic. If we're upset about something, we need to say so. Similarly, we can't know what our mate thinks or feels, so *ask*—and listen. Often, we assume the worst when the reality is not so harsh or catastrophic. Direct communication allows us to see the real issue.
6. **Give grace.** Accept that no one, including you, engages in conflict perfectly. Look for the meaning behind your mate's words. Take in what is fair and let their unfair or inaccurate words fall to the ground without a response.



7. **If you're going around in circles, stop.** If you or your partner are repeating the same things, you're stuck in a loop. People repeat things when they don't feel listened to. Slow down and try active listening to check your understanding of their side of things. Aim to hear before you need to be heard.
8. **Find common ground.** There's usually something you can agree on, even if it's that you don't want to fight. Anything that will help to get you both back on the same team is a good thing and builds positive momentum. It's also a way to validate your partner and let them know you see them.
9. **Touch affectionately.** The next time you and your partner are angry with each other, try a hug, a soft pat on the back, or a kiss. This fun technique can go a long way towards restoring a sense of safety and connection. For those of us who struggle to find the right words, a physical act of affection might be a great substitute.

What if your partner is the one doing the dirty fighting? Their bad behavior might be hard to take, but responding in kind is only going to make things worse. Disengage from the conflict and firmly but calmly state that you are not going to communicate with them while they are using that behavior. Setting a boundary like this will either help your partner realize their mistake, or help you realize you need to stop being around them.

## Reflection

Which dirty fighting techniques have you caught yourself using in a conflict or argument?

What deeper motivation might be driving your dirty fighting?

What steps can you take to change your behavior?



# Essential communication skills

We've looked at several ways our communication can go wrong. Now, let's look at some tools and techniques we can use to make it better.

## Assertive communication

There are lots of different ways we can communicate, but assertive communication is the Goldilocks of communication styles—not too harsh, not too submissive. It's a way of making our feelings, wants, and needs clear without disrespecting the listener. As a result, we're most likely to be understood, respected, and to get our needs met while maintaining a good relationship with our partner.

To better understand assertive communication, it helps to first understand what it is not: it's not aggressive, nor is it passive.

### *Aggressive communication*

Aggressive communication might include:

- Shouting or yelling
- Insults or personal attacks
- Harsh criticism
- Blaming or accusing
- Threats or intimidation
- Interrupting or speaking over our partner
- Physical violence such as slapping, kicking, or pushing

Often, aggressive communication incites our partner into defensiveness and fighting back. What starts as a dialog quickly escalates into a conflict or an all-out fight. The point we were trying to make is lost and we create an even bigger issue to resolve.

Other times, our partner may give in to our aggressive communication. Although we might feel like we've won the argument, our relationship will have lost—and our loved one will feel we've "walked all over them." This is likely to create resentment and later they'll act out with aggression, passive-aggressive behavior, or simply withdraw.

Either way, if our aggressive communication is a regular feature of the relationship, our partner can suffer serious emotional harm. And, if we're hurting our partner, we're also hurting ourselves.

### *Passive communication*

Assertive communication also differs from passive communication, where we fail to speak up for our own wants and needs. As a result, we've removed the chance that our partner will make things right or adjust their future behavior. They remain unaware of the hurt they've caused and are likely to repeat their bad behavior next time.



The same way that walking all over our partner hurts them, it's also not healthy for us to be doormats. We'll soon feel resentful, which is likely to brew and erupt later, leaving our partner confused about the mixed messages they're hearing.

### *Passive-aggressive responses*

One version of passive communication is passive-aggressive communication—another trap that we might fall into. This will initially look like we agree with the other person, but later we are:

- Being stubborn, disagreeable, or irritable in the relationship
- Complaining, criticizing, or protesting unrelated issues
- Procrastinating, intentionally being forgetful, or performing tasks inefficiently
- Ghosting, stonewalling, or giving someone the silent treatment, leaving them to piece together the cause of our unresponsiveness
- Saying things to guilt-trip our partner, such as reminding them of past mistakes or failures
- Using sarcasm, cynicism, or giving back-handed compliments: “Wow, your outfit is actually cute today”
- Playing the martyr: “I guess I’m not worthy of being treated to a nice dinner”
- Communicating with negative body language, like looking away, distracting ourselves with our phone, crossing our arms, or rolling our eyes

As with aggressive communication, we may feel a temporary sense of satisfaction for getting even. But like with passive communication, we're making it impossible to get our needs met. Instead, we're cultivating defensiveness, resentment, and an ongoing power struggle that nobody wins.

### *What assertive communication IS*

Assertive communication is the middle ground between aggression and passivity. It means clearly stating:

- how we feel
- what we want
- what we need

However—and this is equally important—we do so while accepting and respecting the fact that others have their own feelings, wants, and needs.

Assertive communication is specific, clear, and non-accusatory. We keep the focus on our internal emotions rather than what our partner may have been thinking (which we're likely to get wrong). Speak in terms of Facts and Feelings:

- **Facts:** what is the situation, as you see it? State it simply, without exaggerating.
- **Feelings:** how do you feel? Use “I” statements and avoid blaming.

Try this formula: “When [fact], I feel [feeling].” For example: “When you arrived late to our date night, I felt hurt.” This is far more likely to start a productive conversation (and avoid making your partner defensive) than “you clearly have NO respect for me—if you did, you'd have arrived on time!”

Then, request the change you'd like to see from the other person. “In the future, I'd appreciate it if you prioritized our evenings together.” By being specific, we make it easy for our partner to change successfully.



Rather than producing resentment, guilt, or all-out conflict, assertiveness is more likely to:

- **Get our needs met.** Our partner now knows that their actions have upset us. They hopefully feel motivated to change their behavior and arrive on time for future dates.
- **Resolve conflict effectively.** We haven't insulted or shouted at our partner, just expressed our feelings. We're in a good place to find and negotiate a solution that works for both of us.
- **Strengthen our relationship bond.** By expressing ourselves openly but respectfully, we're building intimacy and mutual understanding with our partner.

### *How boundaries help with assertive communication*

The concept of boundaries is a critical tool for assertive communication. It simply means understanding and accepting that both individuals in a relationship are their own person, with their own wants, needs, feelings, and free will. We're not the boss of our partner, and they're not the boss of us.

This is helpful because it reminds us of where our control—and responsibility—starts and ends. We can explain our point of view and how we feel about something (remember those "I" statements!). If we want our loved one to do or change something, we have the right to ask them. But they have the right to say no or not do it. Likewise, our partner can ask us to do something and we can refuse or not do it.

Of course, it's nice for our partner to cooperate with us and treat us kindly in general—that's what we want from a relationship. But sometimes they will slip up, or cross a line, as will we. Nobody's perfect, so be prepared to give grace.

### *When our request goes unmet*

You've shared your feelings and requested that your partner do something differently, but their behavior hasn't changed. Now what?

Perhaps it will take some time for your partner to make the changes you've requested. Old habits—like always showing up late—die hard. If you see them trying and sometimes doing better, appreciate their determination and praise them when they get it right. You'd want them to do the same for you.

On the other hand, if there is no sign of change, ask yourself, "Can I be okay if they never change?" If your answer is yes, accept that your partner can't or won't do as you've requested. Focus on what you can do to make yourself happy. Maybe you can use the time you spend waiting for your partner to show up for a date to read an article or text a friend.

If the issue is more serious and your answer is no, you can't be okay if your partner doesn't change, then accept that reality and move on from the relationship. Do not try to make them change with aggressive or passive-aggressive behavior. As we've covered, this is only going to create an unhappy relationship and cause harm to your partner and you.

### *Practicing assertive communication*

It's not uncommon that we use aggressive, passive, or passive-aggressive communication styles out of habit rather than as an intentional strategy. This may be especially true if we saw poor communication modeled by our families when we were children. Perhaps we adopted a dysfunctional communication style as a way of protecting ourselves in the past, but it no longer serves us well.



Like breaking any bad habit, improving our communication skills takes awareness of what we want to change and lots of practice. Look for indications that you're using an aggressive or passive strategy. Resolve to do better.

To practice, identify some difficult conversations you've had in the past or need to have in the future, then write out what a good, assertive approach might look like. Rehearse before you approach your partner. Be prepared to course-correct if you find yourself drifting into aggressive or passive communication styles. Taking time to prepare helps us to choose a communication style that's just right.

## Reflection

Would you say you tend to communicate more using an assertive style, aggressive style, or a passive (including a passive-aggressive) style?

If it's a style other than assertive, what fear (e.g. powerlessness or abandonment) might be preventing you from using assertive communication?

What steps can you take to shift your communication to a more assertive style?



# Listening

Listening is half of communication—if someone talks but no one listens, no communication takes place. While listening may look like the ultimate passive activity, good listening actually takes effort. This is a skill that can be learned and improved by understanding the concepts and practicing the techniques.

Listening, of course, is a useful communication skill for work and social situations, not just for our intimate relationships. Regardless of the setting, here are some listening abilities to build:

1. **Concentrate on what's being said.** That means we need to ignore distractions (especially our phone), avoid daydreaming, and shut down our internal dialogue. Don't plan what you are going to say next—just listen.
2. **Pay attention with your body.** Body language matters: maintain good eye contact, avoid folding your arms, smile, and lean in. An occasional nod or appropriately placed “um-hum” conveys affirmation, agreement, comprehension, and interest.
3. **Make the conversation safe.** Try not to judge what the other person thinks or feels. Avoid shaming, criticizing, blaming, or other negative reflections. This encourages our conversation partner to continue sharing.
4. **Seek to understand.** Our job is to simply understand the other person, not agree with them. Even if they say something about us that we *disagree* with, now is not the time to jump in and defend ourselves. Take in their perspective—there will be an opportunity later for you to share a different one.
5. **Ask questions.** Asking about someone's thoughts, feelings, and experiences show you are interested and encourages them to explore and share more fully. Keep your questions open-ended and avoid those that lead to dead-end answers like “yes” or “no”.
6. **If needed, ask for clarification.** It's okay to ask someone to explain if you're struggling to understand something they said. However, avoid focusing on trivial details so much that you miss their main point.
7. **Be patient.** Don't interrupt, don't fill silence with your own words, don't finish their sentences, and don't top their story with a story of your own. This is their time to talk—yours will come.
8. **Don't solve their problems.** Often the person talking wants support, not advice. People are much more likely to take a course of action when they've come to their own conclusion. Use questions to guide them there, or at least ask if they want your suggestions before giving them.
9. **Reflect what you hear.** More on that next.

“We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.”

—Epictetus



## Active listening

Active listening is a technique where we repeat what the other person said in our own words. It's a positive way of engaging in the conversation while communicating to your partner that you understand and empathize. Withholding judgment and advice is a key component of this practice.

Active listening especially shines in our intimate relationships and during difficult conversations:

- It forces us to concentrate on what's being said and truly understand the other person.
- Since we're reflecting words back, it keeps us from responding aggressively or defensively.
- If what they said was exaggerated or inflammatory, hearing it repeated back may prompt them to say it more accurately or tone it down.
- It makes sure you and your partner are talking about the same subject, eliminating needless confusion and conflict.
- Mirroring what the person said helps them feel validated and understood.

### *What active listening sounds like*

Here are two conversations between Lauren and Nick that demonstrate active listening:

**Lauren:** I had a rough day at work, I'm exhausted from staying up late to get the laundry done, and I come home to this mess. You NEVER help around here!

**Nick:** It sounds like you're tired, irritated about the mess, and you don't think I contribute enough to keeping the house clean and tidy. Did I understand that right?

**Lauren:** Mostly, although I should say you do help *sometimes*. I don't think you do enough, however.

**Nick:** Okay, so you want me to do more. Let's talk about what needs to change.

Notice when Nick reflected Lauren's words back, she had a chance to correct the most provocative part of her statement. Note, too, that Nick didn't get defensive and sought understanding, even though he still might not agree with his wife's view.

Here's another example:

**Nick:** I wish you hadn't told your sister and her family they are welcome stay here for a month while they are between houses. That's so like them to mooch off us, but if we asked them for a favor, they'd turn us down. And their kids drive me crazy.

**Lauren:** So you're dreading having my sister and her family stay with us and you want me to tell her they're *not* welcome here? Is that what you're saying?

**Nick:** I mean, I *am* dreading it, but no—of course they're welcome. They're family, and it's the right thing to do. I guess I would just like it if each family could have some time apart while they're here.

**Lauren:** I could see how that would be a good idea. What do you suggest?



Had Lauren not used active listening, this conversation could have gone bad quickly. She might have expressed outrage at Nick's initial statement, resulting in a huge argument and Nick digging his heels in about not having them to stay. Instead, she was able to realize Nick wasn't *really* suggesting they revoke their offer—he was just hoping for some accommodations. Eventually, they got on the same page and worked toward a mutually satisfying solution.

Mastering listening and the active listening technique takes time and practice. However, the relationship benefits we get make it well worth the effort.

## Reflection

Which listening skills are you good at? Which need some work?

Ask your partner, a friend, or family member to have a conversation with you so you can practice active listening skills. How did you do? What aspects of active listening do you still need practice?

## Planning for difficult conversations

Do you and your partner have some difficult conversations that surface again and again with no resolution? Then they create conflict that spills over into other parts of your relationship? Even if you don't usually struggle to talk with your partner, there may be certain subjects that can really make the dialogue go sideways.

Unfortunately, these difficult conversations are often ones that matter the most. Any topic where your opinions differ and the stakes are high is a candidate for a difficult conversation. The good news is, we can learn to better handle these negotiations.



## Make a plan

Based on past conflicts, you probably already know which subjects lead to difficult conversations between you and your partner. To have a better, more productive, and less damaging dialogue is going to require some planning and preparation. Trying to resolve the issue “in the moment” or “whenever” has already proven to be a non-starter, right?

Begin by determining your goals around the issue. What do you really want for yourself, the other person, and the relationship? That also means asking ourselves the question, “How would I behave if I really want these results?” Another way to think about it is, “What actions do I need to *avoid* if I’m going to meet this goal?”

Plan your opening. Start a difficult conversation in a “soft”, non-threatening way. Anticipate your partner’s hot buttons around this subject and avoid them. Consider beginning by stating a broad goal the two of you agree on.

Next, you’ll want to get all relevant information into the open, which means *both* parties will need to provide their perspective. If either of you give in before feeling heard, you may reach an agreement, but it won’t have long-term support. This includes not only laying out the facts, but also your feelings about the situation.

## Stay on track

The key to making sure both you and your partner are contributing to this mutual understanding is to notice if the conversation gets derailed. Part of your planning process should include anticipating these conversation detours.

Knowing your partner like you do, what are the challenges likely to look like in your discussion? What are your “buttons” that may crop up? Is one of you likely to shut down and stop participating? Or perhaps one of you tends to get aggressive when threatened? What is the best way to respond if this happens?

If your partner shows signs of withdrawal or aggression, take a step back. Check yourself for any disrespectful, aggressive, or intimidating behavior that may have prompted their reaction, and adjust if necessary.

This is a good time to restate the common goals you and your other half established. Make sure you’ve listened closely to what they want. Sometimes, their true purpose lies deeper than what they’re able or willing to say.

If you catch *yourself* growing quiet or getting aggressive with your communication, it’s a sign you’ve had a button pushed. Ask your partner if the story you’re telling yourself is true. Note that *asking* whether we’re seeing things the same way is not the same as *insisting* we’re right. Recognize and correct any distorted thinking, and you’ll be better able to re-engage in the conversation without the emotional flooding. Take a time-out if necessary.

## Go for a good outcome, not speed

Ask your companion about the path to *their* understanding. How do they see the facts? What stories are they telling themselves? Be curious, listen, and talk tentatively. Words like “perhaps” and statements like “it looks like...” make it feel safer, lower the other person’s defenses, and invite them to share.



Continue to watch for any signs that your partner has started resisting and adjust your approach if they are. Monitor yourself for your emotions trying to hijack your communication. While this may sound like you're doing the emotional work the both of you, remember that *you* are the only one you can control. Ideally, both you and your partner will take this approach—imperfectly—and help each other move the exchange forward.

As you work to merge your two perspectives, state what you agree on. Where you don't agree, compare your two views without suggesting the other person is wrong. Get creative in searching for a win-win solution.

Don't be in a hurry—difficult conversations take more time and effort than day-to-day dialogue. You may advance the negotiations a little, then agree to take a break and come back to the topic again later. Jotting down what you agreed on so far, so you're ready to pick up again later, can be very helpful. Commit to staying in dialogue until you find a mutually agreeable solution. All these techniques take practice, so give yourself a break if you don't get them perfect right away.

### ***Resolving difficult conversations***

Growing your skills in mastering difficult conversations will serve you well. The book *Crucial Conversations* by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler sheds more light on this topic. While written to encompass all types of conversations, including the work world, we've drawn heavily from the ideas presented there.

“To effectively communicate, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others.”

—Tony Robbins



# Viewpoint

## Gaslighting

Gaslighting is psychological manipulation that makes the recipient question their feelings, instincts, and even their sanity. It's a term that has become very popular in our collective vocabulary yet is often misused and misunderstood. Gaslighting includes a variety of techniques, such as:

- Pretending not to understand when you do.
- Labeling your partner's thoughts as crazy or imagined.
- Questioning the other person's memory of events when they remember correctly.
- Pretending to forget what occurred when you actually remember.
- Denying promises that you know you made.
- Trivializing the other person's feelings as being too sensitive when their reaction is somewhat normal.

While these actions may seem relatively harmless, over time, this pattern causes the targeted person to feel confused, anxious, isolated, and depressed. In other words, it hurts them.

Less obvious but equally important is that it hurts the person doing the gaslighting. Having a partner who is stressed, down, or withdrawing from the relationship is not fun and not what most of us want. This pattern of interaction prevents us from enjoying a close, healthy relationship.

Gaslighting, like other harmful actions, happens when we try to control what's happening to us by controlling others. No one likes to "be in trouble" with our partner, engage in conflict, or even own up to our own poor conduct. To dodge these uncomfortable feelings, we try to take the heat off by putting it on our mate.

Usually, we avoid these emotions because they are more painful than they need to be. We see criticism, disappointing others, and conflict as awful, almost life-threatening situations. As a result, we overreact with a no-holds-barred approach to deflecting the focus onto others.

Even healthy couples have conflicts, and all of us receive occasional negative feedback. Facing disapproval from our partner or even our own "I could have done better" self-talk doesn't have to be a big deal. Most people navigate relationships without resorting to this destructive pattern and you can, too.

One more note: simply disagreeing with your partner isn't gaslighting. It is normal that two people will legitimately remember an incident differently. Go ahead and say you disagree if you honestly do, but do so gently. Also, if you truly don't understand something, that's not gaslighting either. It's *pretending* that you don't understand when you do that crosses the line.



# Faith Perspective

A gentle answer deflects anger, but harsh words make tempers flare.

—[Proverbs 15:1](#)

Jesus gave us the perfect model for communication. He used different styles for different situations, deciding exactly which response would be most effective, and then delivering it.

Sometimes, that meant he was silent and chose not to respond, simply “turning the other cheek.”

Other times, he was assertive, “speaking the truth in love.” This means saying directly what happened and how it affected us or others, yet speaking kindly to that person as someone we love.

Occasionally, he used “righteous” anger, but this passion was not about vengeance or evening the score for some personal offense—it was about doing what’s necessary to stop injustice.

The key is that Jesus always *chose* how to respond. He never just *reacted*. He calls us to do the same: to carefully consider what good, long-term result we desire, and then decide which response is most likely to achieve that end. By controlling our emotions and following his example, we become more effective at communicating with others and dealing with difficult situations.

## Reflection

What’s an example of an offense that you could choose to let go of and not respond to? How would not responding lead to a better outcome than confrontation?

What’s an example of an offense that you should address and not let slide?

How could you address it assertively by “speaking the truth in love”?



# Exercises

## Processing strong emotional reactions

Continue writing down answers for these seven questions for any incident you become upset, angry, or have a conflict with anyone.

|   |                      |
|---|----------------------|
| Date  |                      |
| 1. What happened?   |                      |
| 2. What emotion(s) did you feel?  |                      |
| 3. What thought(s) created the emotion(s)?                              |                      |
| 4. How big of deal was this?  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 5. How big was your reaction?   | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 6. Why did this bother you so much?                                     |                      |
| 7. How else could you think about it so it wouldn't be such a big deal? |                      |



## Apply Good Communication Techniques

Identify three strategies you can use to improve your communications with others. Over the next week, practice applying those strategies. How did they work? What aspects do you still need to practice? Reflect on the results when you applied one of these techniques to a conversation, particularly a difficult conversation.

Look at the example below, then use the templates provided or write out your answers in your journal.

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| Date            | February 26  |
| Topic discussed | Spending. Partner was worried about how much we've been eating out. Since we both just got promotions, I think we deserve to have fun—within reason.   |
| Technique used  | Planned for the conversation beforehand. I made a mental note to state at the start that I also want to save and be careful with money.<br><br>Used active listening to help him feel heard and clarify what he was saying:<br>"So, you feel like I'm encouraging us to spend excessively, correct?"<br>"It seems to me you're saying that spending money makes you feel like a bad person."   |
| Result          | Planning ahead meant we started by stating the same goals, which helped the conversation stay productive.<br><br>Using the active listening helped partner identify his own distorted thinking around money. He in turn reflected back to me: "You're saying that penny pinching makes you feel like a loser." Bingo!<br><br>Eventually agreed to save 80% of disposable income and put 20% into a joint account for spending. Good problem solving! |
| Ways to improve | Emotions still ran pretty high at times and we both used personal attacks—partner accused me of being clueless, I called him stingy. We both managed to take a breath and apologize, but I want to avoid the personal attacks altogether in future—they set us back.   |



|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| Date            |  |
| Topic discussed |  |
| Technique used  |  |
| Result          |  |
| Ways to improve |  |

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| Date            |  |
| Topic discussed |  |
| Technique used  |  |
| Result          |  |
| Ways to improve |  |



# Guidepost



- While good communication skills are essential to any healthy relationship, without good emotional control, we'll never be able to apply those skills.
- Poor communication techniques include stonewalling, intimidation, and dirty fighting. All these techniques can stoke resentment, fear, and further conflict.
- Assertive communication is a way of making our feelings, wants, and needs clear without disrespecting the listener. We're more likely to be understood and respected, and to get our needs met, while maintaining a good relationship with our partner.
- Listening is a skill that can be learned and improved upon, and when we do, it benefits us in work and social situations as well as our intimate relationships.
- Active listening is a technique where we paraphrase what the other person said, helping them feel heard, clarify what they said, and reach a shared understanding.
- Difficult conversations are ones where the opinions differ and the stakes are high. Planning our approach and watching for signs of derailment can make those exchanges productive.





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**SESSION 10**

Arriving at your destination

# The BIG Idea

This Guidebook is meant to get you off to a good start on your journey of healing and change, but it is probably not going to take you all the way to realizing your full potential. In this session, we touch on several other topics that should be helpful as you continue on this path.

## Measuring progress

You may be wondering: how do you know if you've healed from your wounds and permanently eliminated your abusive behavior? While the process is gradual and there is no single point at which a person can claim they have arrived, it is possible to get "there". Allow yourself time. Don't rush the process.

"There" is better than you were before. "There" is when you:

- React to fewer challenging situations
- Catch your reactions much, much sooner than you used to
- Have disconnected some buttons and significantly reduced the size of others
- *Respond* rather than *react* (see the Viewpoint later in this section)
- Have an attitude of continuous growth, especially when you mess up

But keep in mind that "there" does not mean "perfection." You may still:

- Overreact to situations—although less frequently and less strongly
- Start down the path of anger—but don't get to rage
- Raise your voice or say something you regret
- Initially blame your partner rather than look at what's going on inside of you
- Catch yourself *reacting* rather than *responding* to situations

You may remember a question we asked at the beginning of this course: *is what I'm doing helpful to the relationship?* None of the behaviors on the second list are helpful, and reducing or eliminating them should still be the goal. However, if you're prone to being hard on yourself (as most of us are), just know you are human and allowed to be imperfect.

It's also important to realize that your partner may or may not notice your efforts and the changes you're making. Even if they don't perceive it, it does not mean you're not doing good work or making great strides. It simply means that they don't see it or won't admit it. Often this is a self-protection mechanism and not a reflection of reality.



# Reuniting

If you are separated from your partner and thinking about reuniting, make *sure* you are ready. Here are a several things to keep in mind as you readapt to living with your significant other:

- **Go slowly.** Start the reconciliation process a bit like how you'd date a new person. Try meeting in public places where your partner feels safe and un-pressured. When you're both ready you can begin to spend more time together, rebuilding trust and laying the foundations of good communication and healthy boundaries as you go. Moving straight back in together is likely to put too much pressure on you both and end badly. If you truly want *this* relationship with *this* person to work, patience is key.
- **Be ready for conflicts.** Almost every couple argues, so an argument is not a big deal. How it progresses and where it ends up *is* a big deal. If you can consistently resolve conflicts without a big blow-up, then you are beginning to build healthy new habits. If not, you need more time.
- **Use conflicts as learning opportunities.** Think of conflicts and situations where you became emotionally charged as practice. Processing these incidents, such as by journaling about them after you've become upset, has the power to change the outcome next time a similar one happens.
- **Expect to be under a microscope.** Your partner was hurt and may still be on edge, watching you closely and looking for any danger signs. While that might feel unfair, accept it as part of the dues you need to pay to regain their trust.
- **Have an escape plan.** If you are back together but the road is becoming increasingly rocky, what will you do? Make sure there's a way for you to separate again to relieve the pressure rather than letting it build. Don't make big commitments or grandiose gestures at this time—like signing a new lease or getting engaged—in the hope that will paper over the cracks. It won't.
- **Check with your partner.** How are they feeling about being back together? Are there things you do that still upset or scare them? Listen closely and accept criticism as useful, constructive feedback. If your partner tells you something is bothering them, acknowledge their point of view and start from the assumption that it is true and real, rather than getting defensive or dismissing it.
- **Forgive.** Forgive your partner for leaving you, having you arrested, forcing you to go to counseling, etc. They probably did the best they could to help you and try to save your relationship.
- **Let your actions speak for you.** Don't try to convince your partner or anyone else that you are healed. Consistent positive actions, not persuasive words, are what count.
- **Share what you are doing.** If it feels safe to do so, consider sharing with your partner what techniques you are using to prevent yourself from acting in a hurtful way when you feel anxious, frustrated, or angry. This will help them understand your journey and know what to expect when conflict does arise (this is especially important if you plan to take time-outs). They may even be inspired to look at how they could improve their own behavior—although this is not an expectation you should place on them.
- **Get help.** If you can afford it, get help from an experienced counselor who can guide you and your partner (maybe separately) through this difficult adjustment period.



- **Accept that the relationship may fail.** The reality is that even if you do great work and make wonderful strides to becoming a safe and worthwhile partner, your relationship may not survive. In fact, you may decide you don't want it to. If your relationship does come to an end, know that the work you have done, and continue to do, will give you some great tools to help make your next relationship successful, emotionally healthy, and abuse-free.

## Reflection

If you and your partner have been separated and are considering reconciliation, ask yourself the following:

How are you responding to stressors and conflict in other areas of life, such as at work or with other family members? Do you demonstrate better emotional control than in the past?

When you get upset, are you able to respond differently than you did in the past? For example, are you able to calm yourself down and think rationally?

Have you and your partner spent a significant amount of time together, including in stressful situations and arguments, without you slipping into violent or other abusive behaviors?

“Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection we can catch excellence.”

—Vince Lombardi



# New relationships

If your relationship with your previous partner has ended, you may be wondering if you could—or should—get into another one. The question about being ready to date or enter a new relationship is important. How do you know you are prepared so you won't repeat actions that hurt a loved one in the past?

No self-quiz, outside evaluation, or formula will magically tell you the answer, but here are some pointers to help guide your decision:

- **You realize that don't need a relationship.** You may *want* to be in one, but you are content with life when you're not.
- **You know how your actions hurt your former partner** and you're committed to not repeating them.
- **You've determined the underlying cause(s) of your hurtful actions and healed from them.** Much of this Guidebook is about identifying those causes and showing you a path toward healing. Follow through with the work you've started.
- **You've honestly evaluated your progress.** You've checked your thoughts and reactions during stressful and hurtful situations, and they're much healthier than they used to be.
- **You've asked for and listened to feedback.** Seek candid opinions from friends and family members who know you well and who spend significant amounts of time with you.
- **You know this is not about finding the right person** who doesn't set you off. It's about whether or not you can control your reactions regardless of what another person says or does.
- **You understand that dating and relationships are more challenging than friendships.** Dating subjects us to the possibility of rejection, and relationships make us vulnerable to deeper hurts like feeling unworthy or unlovable. You feel ready to meet these possibilities, equipped with the truth about your worthy and lovability.
- **You're willing to go slow.** You allow yourself to be tested as you get closer to your new flame. You use each of your bad reactions as an opportunity to challenge distorted thoughts, then practice a different, non-violent, non-controlling response. If you catch yourself thinking, feeling, or behaving in ways that led to abuse before, you're prepared to back off.

Maybe this self-evaluation says you're not ready. That's okay. It just means you need more time. Rushing it will create bad outcomes for both you and your potential partners, so invest in yourself *now* to get prepared for dating and relationships later.

If you've decided that you don't want to be in a relationship, that's just fine. There is absolutely nothing wrong with being single. We are all wired with different relationship needs. But do the work of determining why you caused harm in a relationship anyway. Learning the causes and healing from them will benefit your friendships, work relationships, and self-satisfaction even if you avoid intimate partnerships.



## Reflection

If you are considering starting to date or getting into a new relationship, ask yourself the following questions:

Were you able to check all the items in the bulleted checklist above? If not, why not?

If you start dating or get into a new relationship, what would be a sign that you aren't ready? What would you do if you saw that sign?

“There is no real limit to how much better a person who really commits to getting better can get.”

—Brian Tracy



# Sharing your history

If dating and relationships aren't hard enough, there are some special challenges for those of us with a history of domestic violence or abuse. Do you tell a potential partner about your past? If you do, how do you have that conversation? There is no official rulebook governing this subject, but here are some suggestions:

- **Honesty is important.** Failure to disclose your backstory will likely destroy your new partner's trust later when (and not if) that fact comes out. Be transparent and honest about what you did as soon as you feel able to do so.
- **It's okay to tell them what you've done to change.** You should now know what caused your bad behavior. You should also be able to describe what you've done to heal from those wounds, how you are now thinking differently about difficult situations, and why that makes a difference in how you respond.
- **Allow your partner to ask questions.** Be an open book. Don't set a time limit or make any part of their inquiry off limits.
- **Let them leave.** Decide ahead of time that, if they want to end the relationship, you won't try to stop them. If they're not comfortable with your past, they're not going to be a good partner for you.

You may sometimes feel like you're wearing a scarlet letter—unable to shed the stigma and public judgement of your past. Yes, your past may cost you some opportunities. Yes, you may be judged unfairly. There's no real option other than to be okay with it. You can't control what others think or do—but you *can* become the best possible version of yourself.

Consistently demonstrating non-abusive and non-violent behavior is the best way to build or restore your credibility. Past behavior does not have to define you or prevent you from having a great relationship now. Not everyone will notice how you've changed, but some will. Most importantly, you should feel good about the amazing work you did and the transformation you achieved.

“And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.”

—Philippians 1:6



# Backsliding

What if you've been doing better with your behavior, but then suddenly you feel yourself backsliding? Maybe your conflicts with your partner become more frequent and heated, or you catch yourself repeating behavior you thought you'd put to rest. What can you do now?

The obvious problem with backsliding is that it can harm your partner. Harmful behavior is never okay. But it also erodes your partner's sense of safety and trust, which is likely already on shaky ground. Restoring trust and reconciliation is a long and difficult process—any regression can be devastating.

What's more, self-doubt may creep in. You may wonder if you are ever going to be able to make the permanent changes you want. "All my progress has been for nothing. I'll never get there. I may as well give up, right?" Wrong. In fact, shifting your expectations is often all that's needed to stay on track.

## Imperfection is not failure

Progress never looks like a straight line. Expecting otherwise is unrealistic and sets you (and your partner) up for disappointment. Everyone handles conflict, stress, and difficult situations with varying degrees of imperfection.

The truth is, the brain functions that control your actions are unbelievably complex. The process of rewiring those patterns (neuroplasticity) takes time and is not an exact science. The results won't be immediate, and perfection simply isn't possible.

However, using the "we're all human and we all mess up" alibi to justify inexcusable behavior isn't going to cut it. Both you and your partner *should* expect that blatantly abusive acts stop. You *should* expect to get better. In fact, your loved ones are counting on it.

Backsliding is most likely when:

- You're overconfident in yourself, your progress, or your abilities
- You've become distracted, allowed the intensity of your efforts to fade, and lost focus on what you need to do to change and maintain those changes
- Your efforts center on willpower and changing your surface actions, rather than discovering and healing the root causes that *drive* those actions.
- You're anxious to "arrive" and claim (perhaps to your partner) that you've changed, rather than seeing your work as a life journey.

The remedy, then, is to humble yourself, regain focus, and continue exploring the deeper causes of your behaviors. Shift your motivation from getting your partner back to becoming the best possible version of yourself. That mindset change is both helpful and freeing.



# Continuing your journey

As we said at the opening of this session, this Guidebook was meant to give you a good *start* on your journey, but it was not intended to encompass the *whole* journey.

Hopefully you are already noticing big changes in yourself and your behavior. If you are being realistic, however, you are probably also beginning to realize that your work will never be done. Don't let that discourage you—embrace that growing and maturing into the best version of yourself is a continuous process and a natural part of life. With that in mind, what's next for you? Every person will likely have a slightly different path, but here are some suggestions you may want to consider:

- **Counseling.** If possible, we highly encourage you to find a coach or counselor that can help you understand yourself and how the concepts we've presented here affect you. Change is difficult and sometimes painful, and it's easy to get stuck, not knowing what to do next.

A good counselor can be invaluable in helping us understand what's really going on in our lives and in our own heads. What's more, they can provide us with a toolkit of useful strategies for change—we've covered a few in this Guidebook, but there are many more.

If you can't afford a counselor, try to find another person to mentor you through the process. This could be a pastor, a coach, a family friend, or anyone else you respect and who personifies the changes you want to make.

- **Community.** Consider spending more time with people you admire for their good emotional control, sound relationships, and integrity. One way to do this is to get involved with a small support group, such as a men's or women's ministry at a church. Ask around to see what's in your area. One conversation at a coffee shop or with a bus driver could point you toward an inspiring and supportive new community.
- **Books, audiobooks, and podcasts.** One of the easiest and least expensive ways to tap into the wisdom of experts is to find a book that addresses the area in which you want to grow. If you're not into reading, look for audiobooks or podcasts and try listening during your commute or while you're doing household chores. If you'd like some suggestions, check out our recommended reading list: [ananiashelp.org/recommended-reading](https://ananiashelp.org/recommended-reading).
- **Groups.** If you found this Guidebook helpful, but would like to review it with the support and encouragement of others, consider joining one of the Ananias Foundation's online groups. It's a fantastic way to share your experiences and learn from other people on the same journey in a safe, welcoming, and non-shaming environment. The group meets online, so you can join from anywhere in the world. Sign up on our website at [ananiashelp.org/groups](https://ananiashelp.org/groups).
- **Ananias Foundation blog.** You will find over a hundred blog posts on our website about various topics related to stopping harmful behavior—all written from the perspective of someone who is working to change. Head to [ananiashelp.org/blog](https://ananiashelp.org/blog).
- **Ananias Foundation YouTube channel.** If you're more of a visual learner, check out the [Ananias Foundation's YouTube channel](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCv8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8v8), where you'll find many of those blog post topics covered in short videos.
- **From Villain to Hero.** Our founder, Michael Clark, has written a book about his personal journey and how he transformed from a person who caused harm into one who enjoys safe and loving relationships. You can find his book in print on [our website](https://www.amazon.com) and in print, e-book, and audiobook forms [on Amazon](https://www.amazon.com).



# Viewpoint

## Reacting vs. responding

A good way to measure your progress is to notice how often you *respond* rather than *react*. While these words may seem like they mean the same thing, there's a subtle but important difference.

The first distinction is the amount of time that passes between the stimulus and our action. A reaction is fast—almost instantaneous. We don't stop to think—we just react. By comparison, a *response* takes more time to develop and deliver. Responding requires us to engage the rational, reasoning part of our brain.

Another difference between reacting and responding is whether or not we consider different alternatives. With a reaction, we say or do the first thing that comes to mind. Contrast that to a response, where we consider several possibilities, then select which words or actions will be the most beneficial.

A reaction will usually look irrational and over-the-top to others, and maybe even to us when we examine it later. Responses, on the other hand, will seem a lot more sensible. A good way to determine the difference between reacting and responding is to ask whether our action has contributed to a positive long-term outcome.

Take time. Notice your emotions and the thoughts behind them. Challenge any distorted thoughts. Then, consider the options and formulate your response, choosing the path that will lead to the best long-term outcome for your relationship.

| Reaction   | Response   |
|--|--|
| You don't stop to think                            | You engage the rational, thinking part of your brain         |
| You don't consider different possible responses    | You consider several possible responses to the situation     |
| You say or do the first thing that comes to mind   | You select which words or actions will be the most effective |
| Your reaction is irrational or over-the-top        | Your response is measured and sensible                       |
| Your reaction is not very helpful to the situation | Your response effectively contributes to a positive outcome  |



# Faith Perspective

This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

– [2 Corinthians 5:17](#)

God is in the business of transforming lives. He starts by giving you a new identity as soon as you accept his invitation to follow him and have a relationship with him. You become a new person. You begin to see yourself, other people, and the world around you in a new way.

You begin to act and react differently, too—more like his son, Jesus. Not because you have to, but because you want to. The transformation is not instant and is never complete, but you'll notice a big change right away. Then, if you let him, he'll continue to shape you more and more into the person you were created to be.

## Reflection

Why is our identity so important in determining how we behave?

How does the idea of getting a new identity free you to think and act differently in the future?

Who is the person that God created you to be?



# Exercises

## Processing strong emotional reactions

Continue answering these seven questions for any incident you become upset, angry, or have a conflict with anyone. We encourage you to continue using this tool for the rest of your life!

|   |                      |
|---|----------------------|
| Date  |                      |
| 1. What happened?   |                      |
| 2. What emotion(s) did you feel?  |                      |
| 3. What thought(s) created the emotion(s)?                              |                      |
| 4. How big of deal was this?  | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 5. How big was your reaction?   | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 |
| 6. Why did this bother you so much?                                     |                      |
| 7. How else could you think about it so it wouldn't be such a big deal? |                      |



# Create a Plan to Continue Your Journey

Create a plan to continue your journey of positive growth and change. Revisit your plan periodically, making revisions if needed.

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Behavior I want to improve                                 |  |
| Drivers of my behavior I want to learn more about          |  |
| Strategies I can use to respond in a better, healthier way |  |
| People, classes, groups, or resources that can help me     |  |

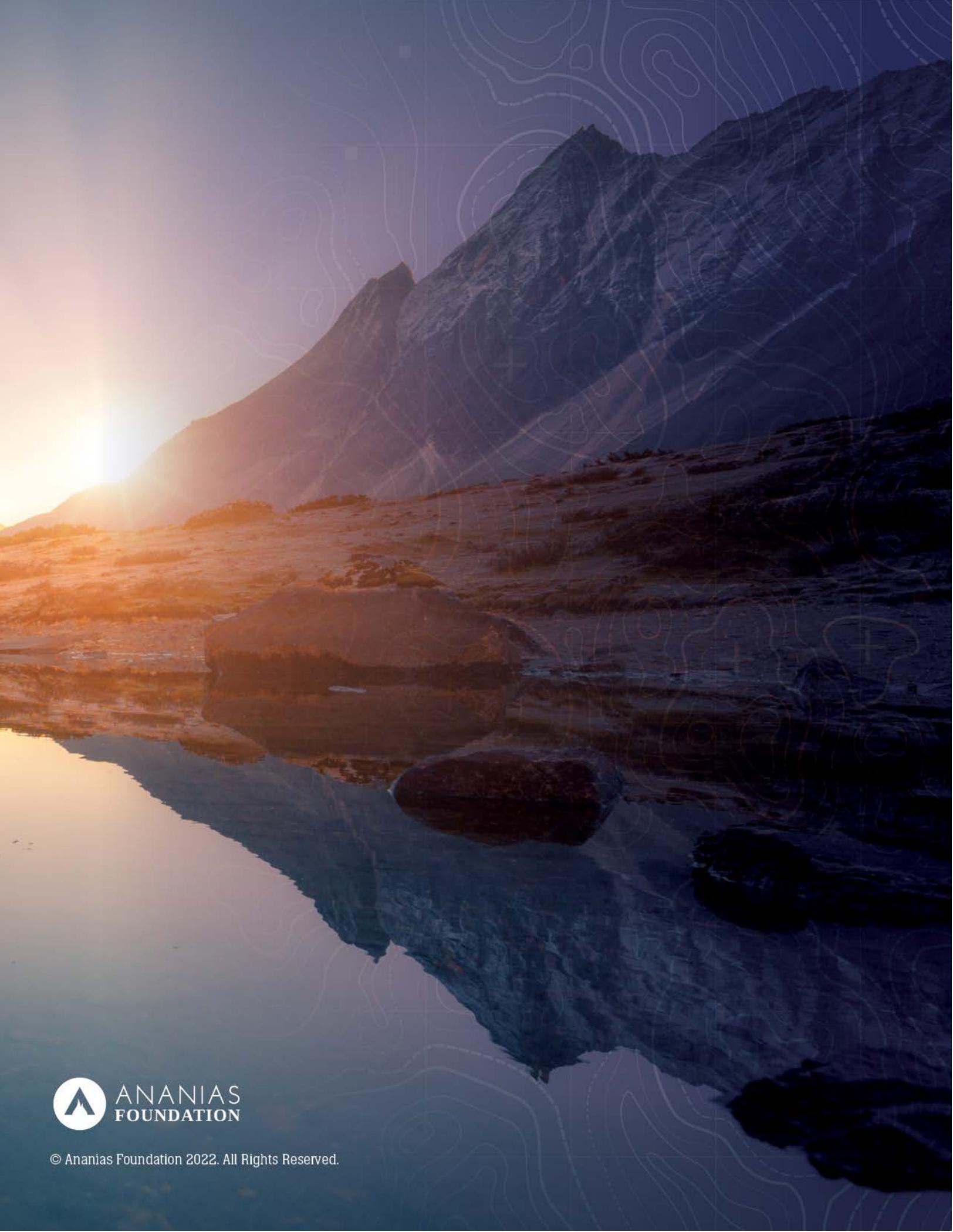


# Guidepost



- Measuring change is difficult. Progress is often gradual and there is no finish line. Allow yourself time and don't rush the process.
- Your partner may or may not notice your changes. That does not mean you're not doing good work or making great strides, however.
- If you are considering reuniting with your partner or starting a new relationship, go slowly and make *sure* you're ready. That means you've worked to understand and correct the causes of past bad behavior, and that you can now handle difficult situations that used to set you off in a better way.
- If you catch yourself repeating behavior you've been trying to change, don't give up or slip into self-loathing. *Do* use it as motivation to regain focus and get back to work.
- Make a plan for how you are going to continue the work you started in this course. Counseling, reading, surrounding yourself with positive mentors, and using other resources from the Ananias Foundation are all good choices.





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