Our Protective Patterns

Reactive Resilience is an instinct that helps us survive challenges and creates personal safety. Reactive Resilience appears as Protective Patterns.

Stress Impacts Us

Life brings adversity. Personal stressors can include family and relationship challenges, serious health issues, workplace pressures, financial concerns, and our moods and attitudes. How we deal with stress impacts our own emotional, mental, and physical health as well as those around us. We Are Resilient™ helps us identify our default patterns of dealing with stress—our Protective Patterns—and discover tools to build resilience for ourselves and for others experiencing stress of all kinds.

Some stress is actually healthy for us—it helps us perform at peak levels. It can help us complete a project on time, achieve an important goal, or be vigilant and safe in a difficult situation. If our stressor is brief, we may have the skills to deal with it well. Even when the stress is intense, we are biologically hardwired as human beings to deal with it in a “freeze, fight or flight” reaction. The extra surges of adrenaline and cortisol are a survival mechanism that can help us react quickly and effectively.

* Cornell University
However, if the period of stress continues or becomes more intense, we may need the assistance of others who care about us to help tap into our own resilience skills. If we have a prolonged period of stress or a traumatic incident, it not only impairs our emotional and mental health, but it can have a toxic effect on the physical body. We may need healing and regeneration to become our best selves.

**Spectrum of Stress Response**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Severity &amp; Duration</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Tolerable</th>
<th>Toxic</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physiological Response</td>
<td>Adaptive Response</td>
<td>Maladaptive Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brief Activation</td>
<td>Time Limited Activation</td>
<td>Extreme, Frequent, or Extended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples</td>
<td>Board Test, Public Speaking Event</td>
<td>Personal Loss, Natural Disaster</td>
<td>Abuse, Neglect, Discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience Need</td>
<td>I can take care of myself</td>
<td>I need a buffering relationship</td>
<td>I need healing and regeneration</td>
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</table>


**Our Protective Patterns Response**

We have fundamental needs for safety: mental, emotional, physical, and community—safety to belong. When our need for safety is not met or when we experience circumstances beyond our control, we often feel fearful. The underlying feeling of fear may cause us to instinctively react, before we’ve had time to fully process a situation. Over time, to address the things in our life that were outside of our control, we have developed instinctive reactions which can settle into emotional protective patterns. These normal human responses of fear include distrusting ourselves and others, hypervigilance, hyper-caretaking, avoiding, defending, and attacking. In our attempt to protect ourselves, some of our reactions turn inward, which may look like distrusting ourselves, avoiding or defending, and some move outward, which may look like distrusting others, hypervigilance, hyper-caretaking, or attacking.

Our protective patterns are a two-edged sword: helpful in some situations but harmful in others. These reactions can be vital for surviving a traumatic incident or toxic stress. They give us a certain level of “Reactive Resilience,” that allows us to react to danger quickly and survive. However, while these emotional patterns can protect us from danger or overwhelming situations, they are harmful in other contexts. If we use them in situations that do not require them, they can work against our best interests. Over time, protecting ourselves can become a pattern that is self-defeating, preventing us from centering, connecting, or collaborating with others.
others. Using Protective Patterns may damage our relationships with others and may be lost opportunities for learning. The key is to learn how to assess each situation and recognize when our protective patterns are helping or hindering us. Then when our protective pattern is activated, we can choose to shift from pattern to possibility by using our resilience skills and create the safety we need inside ourselves.

Though we may use all of the protective patterns, many people have developed a primary emotional pattern that they resort to during difficulties. It can be helpful to think about how we behave in stressful situations.  Are we more like:

- “Distrustful Doris” who has to do everything herself.
- “Hypervigilant Haley” who worries about all the disasters that might occur.
- “Hyper-caretaking Hakeem” who spends so much time on everyone else’s problems that his own needs seem to disappear.
- “Defending Dan” who justifies all his actions because he knows he is right.
- “Avoiding Ana” who drinks her wine to avoid her problem.
- “Attacking Allen” who lashes out when things get tough.

The names may be silly, but they illustrate a deeper point: it is hard to move beyond our first reactions when they have become ingrained in how we behave.  So how do we change?

The first step is recognizing when and how we use our protective patterns. Let’s take a look at six common protective patterns and think about when and how we use them. Then we can look at new ways of dealing with stressful situations and explore skills that will strengthen our resilience.
### Six Types of Protective Patterns

#### 1. Distrusting Myself and/or Others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What it can look like</th>
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<th>How it can harm when it is overused</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doubting yourself</td>
<td>Ensures you are super careful so you don’t make avoidable mistakes</td>
<td>Results in inaction, getting stuck</td>
<td>Practice Positive Reframing—look for an alternative story that includes trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative self talk</td>
<td>Protects you from exploitation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Have compassion and Empathy for yourself and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being wary of others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being overly critical of others or yourself</td>
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</table>

When I make a mistake, I tend to beat myself up. It is a loop that goes around in my head repeatedly. It is hard to move on.

~ Shariz, Executive Director

I hate to delegate because I feel like my team never seems to get it right. I feel like I have to do it all myself.

~ John, Project Manager

Every time I ask my husband to clean the bathroom, he does such a sloppy job. I get so angry. It is easier not to ask.

~ Yolanda, Marketing Consultant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions to think about</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When and how do I distrust myself? How do I distrust others?</td>
<td>Example: When I question my judgment or feel insecure about my abilities like when I don’t volunteer for work projects because I’m afraid I don’t know enough.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When does distrust help protect me?</td>
<td>Example: When I am appropriately guarded with someone; when they act like my friend but I hear they are talking behind my back.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When does distrust hurt me?</td>
<td>Example: When I project my past experiences onto my current situation, like when I accuse my teenager of not doing their homework without checking it out first.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is there a current situation in your life that distrust is part of what isn’t working? If so, what could be done to move forward?</td>
<td>Example: I have difficulty trusting my sister because in the past, she didn’t always stick up for me when someone was bullying me. I don’t trust she will be there for me so I tend to not ask for her help when I need it. I could work on Letting Go of the past and have an open conversation with my sister to start building trust</td>
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### 2. Hypervigilance

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Seeing potential danger everywhere ● Constant high anxiety and worry that negatively impacts you or others</td>
<td>● Identifies threats early, providing time for creating appropriate actions and defenses</td>
<td>● Creates a sense of fear when none may be warranted ● Limits connection ● Prevents appropriate risk-taking needed for growth</td>
<td>● Work with others to reasonably assess risks ● Use Breathing Mindfully to slow down and assess the situation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sometimes I wake up in the night, terrified that I forgot something my boss asked me to do. I have trouble going back to sleep, which means I am a mess the next day and have trouble concentrating. I am so afraid of making a mistake. I can’t afford to lose this job.

~ Tina, Receptionist
I don’t want to end up like my parents who got cancer in their forties. I know there are a lot of additives and strange things in foods and I want to avoid them all. I feel if I follow the latest food advice and stick to my strict diet, I will beat the odds. Of course, that means I say no to a lot of invitations to go out or for weddings or other celebrations. But I know going off track is not worth the one night of fun.

~ Alonso, Director of Procurement

Those stories about children getting kidnapped really scare me. I make sure my kids never walk anywhere without me. They complain that all their other middle school friends can walk to the park without their parents, but I know I can’t be too careful.

~ Sandra, Mom

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When and how do I use hypervigilance?</td>
<td>Example: When I am afraid for the safety of my family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When does hypervigilance help me?</td>
<td>Example: When there is a real safety concern requiring identification and resolution like a car swerving on the road ahead of me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When does hypervigilance hurt me?</td>
<td>Example: When I overreact to a situation and either lash out at someone else or myself like accusing someone of taking my phone when I left it in my car.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a current situation in your life that hypervigilance is part of what isn’t working? If so, what could be done to move forward?</td>
<td>Example: When I spend too much time watching the news and become too anxious to sleep. I need to Nurture Myself and limit my news consumption to 30 min/day in the morning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Hyper-Caretaking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Over-prioritizing others to the detriment of yourself ● Enabling others ● Victimhood/martyrdom</td>
<td>● Helps others in need ● Creates connection ● Strengthens community ● Gives you a feeling of being needed</td>
<td>● Neglects your own fundamental needs ● Doesn't honor the self-reliance and capacity of others</td>
<td>● Spend time Nurturing Myself, meeting your own needs without abandoning the needs of others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As a mother of 3 children, my children are everything to me. I don't have time to think about exercising or eating healthy.

~ Marta Luz, Cashier

My elderly mom has one crisis after another. I am continually asking for time off work. I am afraid I will lose my job. My sister has said she could help, but I know she would just make a mess of it that I would have to clean up.

~ Ahmed, Lab Technician

With long hours of working, I have no time to invest in a relationship or even just go on a date.

~ Susannah, Paralegal

My husband is 10 years older than me and I really worry about his health. I try to fix healthy meals and get so cranky with him when I see him snacking on chips and cookies. I nag him every day to get off the couch and exercise but he rarely listens to me. It is as if he deliberately ignores all my helpful suggestions.

~ Lucy, Designer
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions to think about</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When and how do I take care of other people to the detriment of myself?</td>
<td><em>Example: When I help other people get a raise but not myself.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When does hyper-caretaking protect me?</td>
<td><em>Example: When I can feel like a good person without having the hard conversations with my boss.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When does this hyper-caretaking hurt me?</td>
<td><em>Example: When I burn out and feel exhausted from all my energy going towards others and don’t get my needs met.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a current situation in your life that hyper-caretaking is part of what isn’t working? If so, what could be done to move forward?</td>
<td><em>Example: I need to ask my siblings to help me care for my elderly parents instead of just resenting that they haven’t offered.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4. Avoiding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| ● Withdrawing from specific relationships  
● Retreating to yourself  
● Pollyanna behavior  
● Numbing–avoiding emotions  
● Addictive behavior (substance misuse, shopaholic, overeating, workaholic, TV zombie) | ● Deescalates a situation  
● Creates a safe space which protects you from harm (physical, emotional)  
● Avoids perpetuating previous trauma | ● Shuts down your access to your emotions or needs  
● Prevents finding lasting solutions  
● Creates loneliness  
● Reduces connection | ● Develop the courage to engage honestly and Speak Authentically  
● Confront directly without attacking  
● Invite others in  
● Find healthy ways of coping with unhealthy addictions |

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Dovetail Learning 2020.10.10
I just like to relax with a six-pack of beer every night. Put the game on and tune the world out, since I spend all day solving other people’s problems.

~ Sergio, Maintenance Supervisor

My family argues all the time. I just put my earbuds in and tune them out.

~ Carter, Student

Retail therapy gets me through my days. A few clicks on Amazon, I get to look forward to that package coming, and life seems a little brighter.

~ Ana María, Social Worker

I provide for my family. I have given them the nice house, the best schools—everything they could want. That takes work. And they complain that I work too much!

~ Bao, Lawyer

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When and how do I avoid other people? My own thoughts and feelings?</td>
<td>Example: When I go out after work rather than home to my spouse because I don’t want to talk about our relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When does avoiding help protect me?</td>
<td>Example: When I don’t talk with my cousin because he spent years bullying me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When does avoiding hurt me?</td>
<td>Example: When I put off a conversation with my boss because I don’t have the courage to ask for a raise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there specific people or situations you find yourself avoiding? Why do you think that is? If so, what could be done to move forward?</td>
<td>Example: I am avoiding talking with my mother because I don’t want her to come to visit. I need to tell her how her criticisms impact me and my wife.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## 5. Defending

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Reacting quickly to dig in your heels to defend yourself</td>
<td>● Standing up for yourself</td>
<td>● Interrupts others and shuts down the ability to listen</td>
<td>● Get curious about the other person’s point of view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Responding as if you feel constantly questioned, judged, or accused</td>
<td>● Ensures others’ hear your point of view</td>
<td>● Escalates the other person’s reaction of not being heard</td>
<td>● Use Heartfelt Listening to really hear others’ point of view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Trying to prove you are right, potentially at the cost of the relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td>● Creates distance</td>
<td>● Use Breathing Mindfully to calm down</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Examples

One of my buddies at work likes ribbing me about any little thing that goes wrong. Who does he think he is? I have an inside track on the mistakes that HE has made. They are nothing to sneeze at. My track record is as clean as a whistle compared to his.

~ Ian, Construction Manager

My mother is always getting on me like I have done something wrong. She spends all her time accusing me of not working hard enough in school, spending too much time with my friends, who knows what else. I have done nothing! We end up fighting all the time.

~ Wang Wei, High School Freshman

My brother likes to pick arguments. Well, I get right in it with him. You want to talk politics? I can talk politics! I can tell you what is wrong with that other party until the cows come home. This country needs to change.

~ Barbara, Case Administration Specialist
### 6. Attacking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions to think about</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When and how do I feel defensive or judged?</td>
<td>Example: When I’ve worked really hard on a project and in a meeting with others, my boss focuses immediately on what needs to be improved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When does defending myself help protect me?</td>
<td>Example: When my in-laws attack me for having different religious beliefs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When does defending myself hurt me?</td>
<td>Example: When I harm my relationship with my best friend because I am so defensive about being right.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there specific situations you find yourself on the defensive? Why do you think that is? If so, what could be done to move forward?</td>
<td>Example: When my wife asks me if I paid the electric bill this month, I immediately get defensive and worry that I made a mistake instead of getting curious about why she is asking.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### What it can look like
- Immediately responding in a way that feels like a personal attack to the other person or yourself
- Constantly judging and criticizing others or yourself

### How it can help in appropriate situations
- Protects you from others’ aggression
- Stands against physical or emotional harm
- Creates a feeling of power

### How it can harm when it is overused
- Hostility invites counter attacks
- Stops possible engagement

### What you can do
- Be curious about other perspectives so you can Empathize instead of criticize
- Take a stand by being assertive rather than aggressive
- Create and hold healthy boundaries
So I lashed out at the coach. So what? He was being a jerk. Can’t he see that my daughter is the best player out there and should be playing all the time?

~ Gabriel, Factory Supervisor

Those people are always cutting in line. They need to be taught a lesson.

~ Richard, Pharmaceutical Sales

Everyone talks about losing weight. It is easy to get obsessed with it. Everyone around me seems worried about me, but I ignore them. I am still too big for the dress I bought for my sister’s wedding.

~ Ayesha, Student

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<tr>
<td>When and how do I attack others or myself?</td>
<td>Example: When I get mad at myself for not losing weight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When does attacking help me?</td>
<td>Example: When I stand up for the janitor when the principal is making her work too many hours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When does attacking someone hurt me?</td>
<td>Example: When I hurt important relationships because I resort to mean and unwarranted criticism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a current situation in your life that attacking is part of what isn’t working? If so, what could be done to move forward?</td>
<td>Example: My children are afraid to tell me what is going on in their lives because I judge and attack them for their choices. I need to work on responding to them with more curiosity and patience and less intensity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is important to note as adults, we have developed a range of responses over time. These types of protective patterns—distrusting, hypervigilance, hyper-caretaking, avoiding, defending, and attacking—are not a complete list of “one-size fits all” protective patterns, but rather examples. They illustrate the type of protective patterns that can help us in the right situations but also harm us if used in ways that break down trust. Additionally, many people have two or three protective patterns upon which they rely. For example, they may be *Distrustful/Hypervigilants or Attacker/Avoiders*.

As we recognize how and when we use our protective patterns we need to understand two aspects:

1. **In the appropriate contexts, our reactive protective patterns are very helpful.** They protect us from threatening situations.
2. **In other contexts, our reactive protective patterns harm us by preventing us from responding thoughtfully.** They can be an obstacle to caring for ourselves or connecting and collaborating well with others.

When we strengthen our resilience skills, we have the ability and practices to make the best choice for ourselves for how to respond in each situation. Our self-protective patterns will still be available to use in those situations that require them, but if we can recognize healthier ways to deal with other situations and strengthen our resilience skills, we learn to grow and thrive through the difficult experiences of our lives.

Learning how to use our resilience skills is a life-long process. Even after years of practicing resilience skills, we sometimes don’t use them when we want to or need to. Our protective patterns can reemerge when we are faced with a big stressor and get “triggered,” even if using those protective patterns is not in our best interest at that time. Human beings have a tendency to fall back into familiar patterns and it takes learning and practice to move away from them. Continued personal development and growth requires both acknowledging the gift of our protective patterns for certain situations and learning to use more effective resilience skills for other challenges.
As a final activity, take a moment to consider your responses above. Circle the two protective patterns that you use the most below and consider how you would like to work on them:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protective Pattern</th>
<th>How I can work on it:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Distrusting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Hypervigilance</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Hyper-Caretaking</td>
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<td>● Defending</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>● Attacking</td>
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</table>

The first step in being more centered is noticing ourselves by building awareness — acknowledging when and how we are falling off-center and how we are using a protective pattern in a way that is not helpful. With that sensitivity, it is easier to catch ourselves and practice centering skills instead. In the next section, we will explore these centering skills more fully.

I am so amazed at how much more control I feel since I have been working on the centering skills for the last 6 months. Before I would get triggered and then yell, and end up needing to clean up my relationships after the fact. Now when I get annoyed or frustrated, I notice my protective patterns are being triggered. I am able to take a breath, assess if I should be attacking, then decide what I want to do next. It is really freeing.

~ Tanya, Mom of two
Practical Centering Skills for Personal Resilience

*Personal Resilience* is the inner strength to adapt and strengthen oneself to meet challenges. Strong Personal Resilience creates balance, wellbeing, and a sense of safety.

We develop our Personal Resilience through **Centering Skills**, which ground our body and guide our wellbeing. The practice of centering restores our inner balance through focusing on the present. Awareness of the present places our attention in the here and now, which reduces negative thoughts that are the roots of anxiety and stress. A common cross-cultural centering practice is intentional focus on the breath. Many faith and wisdom traditions as well as athletics, dance, martial arts, singing, theater, public speaking and other high performance pursuits use centering practices. Centering is a “gateway resilience skill” because when we are centered, we can connect and collaborate with others more easily.

How do we center? The skills to help us center include the skills of noticing and listening to our internal clues, breathing mindfully, accepting what is true and letting go of what we cannot control, finding gratitude, finding a positive way forward and being kind to ourselves.

| Centering Skills for Personal Resilience |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Noticing Myself             | Breathing Mindfully        |
|                            | Letting Go                 |
|                            | Finding Gratitude          |
|                            | Positive Reframing         |
|                            | Nurturing Myself           |

These skills help us develop self-awareness, self-regulation, self-empathy, self-forgiveness and self-trust. Now, let us take a deeper look at these six skills, including how they work, how you can use them in daily life, how you can develop them through activities, and practices you can use to strengthen them.
Noticing Myself

Moment of Inquiry: What am I noticing/sensing/feeling?

- Are my Protective Patterns being triggered?
- Is there something stopping me from being able to notice?

This resilience skill involves pausing and noticing, paying attention to the intelligence of our senses, emotions, and intuition. Noticing Myself involves asking ourselves some questions: What are we aware of that is happening in and around us? What emotions are we feeling? When we feel ourselves getting angry, upset or sad, the first thing we can do is ask ourselves, “What is happening in my body and around me?” so we can respond skillfully. When we feel happy or calm, we can also notice what is happening in our bodies and around us, so we can identify what we may have done or not done to feel this way.

An important part of Noticing Myself is being able to recognize, name, and feel our emotions. We can have a varied set of different emotions in rapid order or even at the same time.

When we recognize our emotions, we can discover what they have to tell us. Anger can be a signal from our body that something needs to change. Enthusiasm can be a signal that we want to continue to do what we are doing.

If we listen to our bodies, even difficult emotions hold the key to important information:

- **Anger** is a signal that an important value may have been violated.
- **Regret** lets you know you have done something which you may not want to repeat.
- **Frustration** signals you may need to change what you are doing if you want a different outcome.
Hopelessness signals you may need to let go of the way you are currently trying to do something, or to let go of the specific outcome you want.

Guilt lets you know you may have violated your own standards, and that you need to do something to ensure that you don’t violate them again in the future.

*The Emotional Hostage* 1986, Cameron-Bandler, L., and Lebeau, M.

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*When I am overwhelmed with the hustle and bustle of the clinic, I practice Noticing Myself. This helps me to pause and identify why I am getting triggered. Then I can adjust what I can, accept what is happening, and be able to react more kindly.*

~ Janet, Nursing Supervisor

Reflective Activity: **Pause. What’s the cause?**

When you have a conflict, large or small, take a moment and ask yourself to “Pause. What’s the Cause?” What are the elements of the situation? What is going on with you? What is your body/your emotions telling you? Have one of your values not been met? What is the story you are telling yourself about the situation?

Think about a situation that happened recently. How did what happened around you impact you? What were you feeling? Think of your emotional response and either talk with a friend who listens well or write out what you think is the cause of your emotional response and why.

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Practices to Strengthen Noticing Myself:

- **Noticing while waiting.** When waiting for coffee, at stoplights, filling up gas, in line, on hold, or for your computer/phone to load, notice how your body feels. Frustrated? Anxious? Relaxed? What are your emotions telling you?

- **Reflective noticing.** After an off-centered moment, reflect on what happened. What can you notice with hindsight? Can you notice your emotional triggers? After a really centered moment, reflect on that situation too. When you are more aware of how that feels and what it took to get there, you can reinforce those behaviors.

- **Noticing how you treat yourself.** Notice when you are using negative words about yourself and others. Notice how that impacts you, how it makes your body feel, and how it affects your emotional state. Notice when you are using positive words about yourself and others, how that impacts you, makes your body feel and affects your actions and energy level.
Breathing Mindfully

Moment of Inquiry: Where in my body do I feel my breath?

By pausing and taking slow, full breaths, we calm ourselves. When we pay attention to the sensations of our own breath inside us, we concentrate on our body and bring our mind to rest. Breathing intentionally can help us relax and reduce our stress. In our bodies, breathing mindfully brings our sympathetic and parasympathetic systems into balance, slowing and stabilizing our heart rate. A calm heart opens our mind to thinking more clearly.

As a mother of three boys, I rely heavily on breathing mindfully! Juggling homework help, dinner, bedtime routines, and the unexpected can feel like a three-ring circus. When you throw sibling arguments into the mix, some deep, mindful breaths are absolutely necessary.

~ Ashley, Early Childhood Education Specialist

Activity: Taking Mindful Breaths

Start with one full breath. Put one hand over your heart and one hand on your belly. Breathe in slowly through your nose while mentally counting to three. Focus on the sensation of fresh air passing through your nostrils and coming into your lungs and be aware of how it feels inside your body as your diaphragm begins to drop and your belly expands and contracts. Pause, relax, and then exhale through your mouth as you release the old air, counting slowly to five. This is one mindful breath.

As you breathe mindfully several more times, focus on the sensations. As you breathe, notice...

- how your breath feels coming into your body
- how your breath feels as it leaves your body
- the exact moment your breath enters your body
- the exact moment your breath leaves your body
- the space in between your breaths

How does awareness of your breath make you feel?
Challenge activity: **Schedule Breathing Mindfully**

“Practice makes perfect.” Build your practice by setting your alarm twice a day to remind yourself to stop and take five mindful breaths. A schedule that works for many people is just before you get to work or just before arriving home at the end of your day. Begin to notice throughout the day when you are tense or when you are holding your breath and experiment with taking a few mindful breaths.

> When I find myself being drawn into the chaos of life with three kids, I take a mindful breath and remember what it felt like when my Lola (grandma) would kiss and snuggle with me. That feeling of love and calm becomes a source of strength.
> ~ Bryan, Director of Programs

**Practices to Strengthen Mindful Breathing:**

- **Start by mindful breathing.** Set your tone for the day by starting off with a practice of deep breathing such as meditation or breathing deeply in nature.

- **Breathing in transitions.** Practice deep, mindful breathing at the start of a meeting, before walking in the door to greet a patient, family member or colleague, before starting a new task, just before arriving at work, or before returning home.

- **Breathing while waiting.** Practice deep, mindful breathing at stoplights, in the waiting room, in line, on hold, or waiting for your computer to power on. Take time out from a jam-packed day by stepping outside of work on a break for a moment of mindful breathing.

- **Breathing in difficult times:** When you get frustrated or the conflict around becomes overwhelming—at home, at school or in the world—take mindful breaths before you speak as a way of calming. Take a mindful breath when you hear difficult news or when you have to prepare for a hard conversation.

- **Breathing for better sleep.** When you are trying to go to sleep, taking deep full breaths while mentally counting in 5 and counting out 8 can help relax you and clear your mind.

- **Notice your increased skill in mindful breathing.** As you do this practice for a while, notice over time how many breaths it takes to become calm and centered. With practice, you can go from 100 to 0 with only a small number of breaths!

> When I wake up in the night, I have trouble going back to sleep. Breathing Mindfully is really helpful in calming all those thoughts from the day that crowd my mind. I can usually go back to sleep after eight to ten mindful breaths.
> ~ Lynette, Veterinarian
Letting Go

**Moment of Inquiry:** What is not in my control that would be helpful to let go of?
- Do I need to let go of my own expectations?
- Is there a large value or goal that will help me let go of this issue?

Most of us walk around with conscious or unconscious "baggage"—words or actions that might have been hurtful, or feelings that are not serving us any more. Holding onto them can become a habit. Sometimes, we hold things so long that we don’t even notice we are carrying them.

Naming the unhelpful baggage we are holding is often the first step. But even after we name what we are carrying, letting it go can be challenging. Sometimes we need to let go of our expectations, our attachment to a particular outcome. We may need to tell ourselves an "empowering" story vs the unempowering story we are holding onto, so we can recognize we have the power to let go of lousy feelings or stories about a situation that we do not want to take with us. Other times to let go we have to find compassion and empathy for another person, without agreeing with that person’s perspective or experience. When we have a hard time letting go of something, it may be an indicator to use our courage to address what needs addressing, or change our behavior or expectations. The bottom line is, if we don’t need it? Set it aside.

*I can’t stand the political comments my brother makes on social media. He can make me really angry. Because I love him, before we get together, I have to work on Letting Go so that I can be civil to him.*

~ Paul, Systems Administrator

**Activity: Inventory of Items That Weigh Us Down**

1. Take a moment to think of things that are weighing you down. Are there things people have said to you that you are still holding on to? Are you upset with others in your life? Are there things you have done that you are beating yourself up over? Write each one of these things on a separate small slip of paper.
2. Now, think about whether you have control over those things. Which would be helpful for you to let go of? Crumple up that piece of paper and state out loud or in your mind the reason you no longer need it. Then throw it away. Literally throwing the paper like a ball can give our bodies a sense of “getting rid of something.”

*My coworker is always making little digs at me. I have to use Letting Go to forgive her pettiness everyday to make it through my shift. I know she has a tough life and picking at me is about her own unhappiness and stress.*

~ Agnes, Line Operator

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Practices to Strengthen Letting Go:

- **Letting go of annoyances.** When you find yourself getting wound up by annoyances (being cut off in traffic, out of coffee, a slow internet), notice that it is not in your control and practice just letting it go.

- **Letting go of the hurt.** When someone says something hurtful, you can ask yourself: Is there a grain of truth in what was said to you? If so, there could be something you might want to look into. Otherwise, their comment could be more about them (their needs, insecurities, etc) than about you. Let it go.

- **Letting go for better sleep.** When you are winding down for the evening, review the events of the day and ask yourself—what negativity from the day can I let go of?

  I run into people being jerks all time—in big and small ways. Sometimes it is on purpose and sometimes they are just thoughtless. Letting Go helps me keep moving and focus on my goals.

  ~ Mi-kyong, Web Developer
Finding Gratitude

Moment of Inquiry: What am I grateful for in this moment myself, others or life?

Gratitude profoundly affects our sense of wellbeing. When we focus on gratitude, our emotional resilience is strengthened. In most situations, there is something you can find to be grateful for—though we might have to work a bit to see it. During disagreements with our loved ones, if we hold onto one thing we care about in that other person, we can more easily come up with suggestions that might work for both parties. Even during intense situations, if we find one thing to be grateful for, we can reduce our stress. With a focus on finding gratitude, many times what seemed large and insurmountable becomes a problem that can be solved or a situation that will change over time.

I used to be annoyed all the time—people cutting me off in traffic, cashiers that were too slow, micro-management by my boss. Once I started keeping a gratitude journal, it really changed my attitude. Now I can take the annoyances in life without it ruining my whole day.

~ Vikram, Tech Sales

Activity: Sharing your Gratitude Inventory

Make a list of ten things in your life you are grateful for. Share this list with at least one person in your life and notice how it makes you feel.

Even when Taylor was in the hospital for so long, I focused on Finding Gratitude each day. It was still really tough, but it made the ups and downs just a little bit easier.

~ Laura, Caterer

Challenge Activity: Week of Gratitude

Every day for a week, write down three things for which you are grateful. Write different things each day. Notice how this impacts you.
Challenge Activity: **Gratitude In the Moment**

Take one minute to think about your day and a stressful situation that happened. Think about one thing you are grateful for about that situation or person. How might it change your stressful situations if you can find gratitude during the moment?

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*Thanksgiving is a daily ritual around here. I go down on my knees and thank God for all He has given me. I make sure all my grandchildren do the same.*

~ Hannah, Retired Postal Worker

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**Practices to Strengthen Finding Gratitude:**

- **Gratitude for yourself.** Write a list of your strengths and talents and be grateful for what you offer to the world and to those around you.

- **Meal gratitude.** As you sit down to eat, pause for a moment in gratitude.

- **Meeting gratitude.** At the beginning of meetings, pause to be grateful for your opportunity and for the people attending and their gifts.

- **Gratitude review for better sleep.** Before bed, identify three things from your day for which you are grateful.
Positive Reframing

**Moment of Inquiry:** How can I see the current situation from a different perspective?

Our words shape our reality. We create the stories we tell ourselves about the world, ourselves, and others. Reframing means paying attention to our inner narrative. What story are we telling ourselves? Can we be curious and open to a different way of seeing? Is there an alternative story that might be equally true? When we change the story, we change the meaning, and we change whether something is empowering or disempowering for us. Reframing helps us create new meaning quickly and easily. We can reframe a problem as an opportunity, a perceived weakness as a strength, negativity as neutral and unkindness as lack of understanding. Sometimes, we need to step back and gain perspective on what we are experiencing. We might then be able to find the positive intent behind someone’s negative behaviour. Lightheartedness and humor can help us see the situation with more positivity.

*I couldn’t run my company without Positive Reframing or as I call it, “flipping the narrative.” Every time we run into an obstacle, I have to convince our investors that it is a new opportunity for us, that it will help us get to where we want to go. So far, it has worked.*

~ André, Entrepreneur

*When I was growing up, my aunt used to constantly brag about her daughter’s achievements. Every holiday, I would cringe because I would have to hear about my cousin’s latest gymnastic award or her great grades. I felt so put down by the constant comparison. It was only later that I realized my aunt was doing it because her husband had left and she was pouring her life into her daughter. And all those comparisons spurred me on to do better academically and achieve my goals. My cousin and I have a much better relationship now that I have Positively Reframed it.*

~ Gina, Waitress

**Activity:** **Reframe To Expand Our Perspective**

Take each scenario below and consider the story you might have told yourself when it happened. Maybe the story that you are telling is not the story others would tell. What is an alternate story, that might be just as true to you or others, that will help you feel better about what is happening? Practice reframing the scenarios into a positive story. You might want to do this with a partner to get support and ideas on how to see it differently.
Reframing Exercises:

- You are totally stuck in traffic.
- You have a grumpy cashier at the grocery store.
- A colleague did not complete her tasks so you have to work extra hours.
- Your boss keeps asking you to do a project that you feel is a waste of time.
- Your mom complains that you don’t call enough.
- Your partner burns dinner.

Practices to Strengthen Positive Reframing:

- **Reframing mistakes.** When you make a mistake, recognize that you have been given an opportunity to learn.
- **Rewind to refra​me.** As soon as you notice you are getting off center, ‘rewind’ to the moment it happened and reframe with a new perspective as soon as you can. Catch it before it grows into something larger.
- **Reframing obstacles.** Practice changing the way you see obstacles, so that instead they become opportunities for growth, to do something you had not thought of before.
- **Reframing negativity.** When people present to you with negativity, try viewing their energy as their issue, that you don’t have to absorb.
- **Reframing your perspective through caring feedback.** When someone who cares about you makes a suggestion about how you might view situations or do things differently, “try on” the new viewpoint or action.

I could hardly sleep. When I realized my mistake, that I had shipped the order before the check cleared and now it had bounced, I was really bothered by my screwup. I had never dreamed that one of our clients would do that. After my boss talked to me, I realized that I had to let it go, and used Positive Reframing to see it differently. I had learned an expensive mistake that I would not forget. I am now meticulous in double checking payment has cleared before I send out orders!

~ Luisa, Fulfillment Specialist
**Nurturing Myself**

**Moment of Inquiry:** How can I nurture my body, emotions, mind, or spirit?

- Am I practicing self compassion?
- How can I nurture my sense of joy?

Nurturing ourselves is a skill fundamental to our wellbeing. Our needs are biologically hardwired into us, and ignoring them comes at a risk. This includes our emotional needs for connection and creativity; our physical needs for healthy food, adequate sleep, and exercise; and our spiritual needs for meaning and purpose in our lives.

How can we care for ourselves with compassion? When something difficult happens, we can give ourselves empathy for being in the situation, having to deal with all we have to deal with, and feeling the burden of responsibility. We can forgive ourselves for mistakes and see ourselves as doing the very best we can.

Caring for our physical body is a proven way to reduce the impact of stress on our health, though for many, it can be the most difficult self-nurturing to do. We function better with healthy eating, quality sleep and moving our bodies regularly. Moreover, we can take better care of those around us when we take care of our own physical selves. If we are angry or frustrated, the best remedy can be some healthy food, a drink of water, sleep, or a walk.

For many people, nurturing ourselves comes from connecting with others. A caring relationship—whether with a family member, friend, or colleague—can be our best buffer when we are off-centered or lonely. Conversations, a hug, or even sitting quietly together can do wonders for our spirit. Nurturing ourselves may mean being open to goodness from others, through support, compliments, and caring feedback.

*As a father with two young kids, I have no time. Between work, picking the kids up, getting them fed and into bed, and trying to get chores done, I fall in bed exhausted. My buddy who has kids just a little older has helped me see that things will get a little easier in just a few years. I try to give myself a little compassion and know I am doing the best I can. I know I am a better dad if I am Nurturing Myself and not beating myself up.*

*~ Ricardo, Drafting Technician*

**Activity: Giving Myself Self-Compassion**

Sometimes it is difficult to see our own situation with kindness. Think of a challenging situation you are facing right now. If a friend told you about a similar situation, how would you kindly and with love support and advise them? Now, apply your kindness and support to yourself and write your response or talk to a friend about it.
My daughter has special needs and caring for her can honestly be all consuming. As much as I love her, I had no idea what it would be like to never have time for my own needs. If my parents didn’t come and help from time to time, I would go crazy. When she visits, my mom insists I spend time Nurturing Myself, so I can be a better mother to my daughter.

~ Viktoria, Food Writer

Activity: **Giving Myself TLC**

1. **Write on a sheet of paper** a list of the actions that you are most likely to need when you are pulled off center. Examples: Eat healthy foods, sleep, find alone time, express my feelings in a healthy way (e.g. talking, creating art, journaling), find reasons to laugh, recognize my own strengths and achievements, do something comforting.

2. **Circle the activity** you most commonly need when you are off center.

It is good for me to recognize that working out is an important part of Nurturing Myself and Centering. I find I am better at home if I have my workout before making dinner. It helps me deal with the stress of a long day.

~ Luke, Policy Analyst

Practices to Strengthen Nurturing Myself:

- **Nurturing your physical self.** Choosing more nutritious food, moving your body, and having a regular sleep cycle will nurture you at the most basic level. Notice when you are feeling healthy and strong and reinforce the practices that have helped create this state of being.

- **Letting in compliments.** When someone gives you a compliment or appreciation, practice acknowledging and letting in the positive words and feeling the appreciation.

- **Letting in your own genius.** Recognize and honor your own gifts, talents, accomplishments, and personal genius. Each of us is uniquely gifted in an extraordinary way. Letting in your own goodness is transformative.

- **Nurturing your creativity.** Take some time for creativity: Create dinner/dance/garden or anything else taps into your creativity instead of chilling in front of the TV or social media.

- **Nurturing through connection.** Take some time for personal connection and conversation. Call a friend, write a letter, play a game, visit in person or do anything else that strengthens your relationships. Relationships can be a profound way of centering ourselves.

- **Communicating your needs.** Let your family members or colleagues know when you need time/space to regroup your energy and nurture yourself.
Moments of Inquiry

- **Noticing Myself**: What am I noticing/sensing/feeling?
  - Are my Protective Patterns being triggered?
  - Is there something stopping me from being able to notice?

- **Breathing Mindfully**: Where in my body do I feel my breath?

- **Letting Go**: What is not in my control that would be helpful to let go of?
  - Do I need to let go of my own expectations?
  - Is there a large value or goal that will help me let go of this issue?

- **Finding Gratitude**: What am I grateful for in this moment, myself, others, or life?

- **Positive Reframing**: How can I see the current situation from a different perspective?

- **Nurturing Myself**: How can I nurture my body, emotions, mind, or spirit?
  - Am I practicing self compassion?
  - How can I nurture my sense of joy?
Practical Connecting Skills for Relational Resilience

Relational Resilience is the ability to adapt and respond to challenges in a relationship. Strong Relational Resilience builds trust and safety by helping us remain connected and open-minded in difficult situations.

Connecting well with others is one of the most meaningful things in life. We want to belong, to be accepted. We want to be seen, heard, and valued. The true value of connecting is understanding and being understood by another person. When we connect well and form deep relationships, we feel the bond of mutual caring. This bond of mutual caring—strong Relational Resilience—is enhanced when we use our Connecting Skills.

Strengthening our Relational Resilience through connecting also creates a virtuous cycle with our Personal Resilience. When connecting authentically, we build Relational Resilience between us, and we also strengthen Personal Resilience in ourselves and the other person.

We all appreciate a good friend who will listen to us. We know intuitively that identifying and spending time with a caring person (friend, spouse, mentor, colleague) is a powerful source of strength. When a caring person encourages us, reminding us that they believe in us and that we can achieve our dreams, we feel more empowered to achieve our goals.
Lending our encouragement to a friend, colleague, or child at the right time can make all the difference in their ability to bounce back. For children, connecting with a caring adult is the most important factor for developing resilience. A single caring person can be transformative for a child. For children, the adults who have trusting relationships with them—parents, relatives, and those in the helping professions (like educators or health care providers)—can anchor them to their own Personal Resilience by creating strong Relational Resilience between them.

While we are biologically hardwired to want to be in a relationship with other people, we are not hardwired to know how to build those relationships well. We often struggle with our connecting skills, but developing and maintaining healthy, secure relationships can be made easier with skill development. Our instinct for emotional safety—our Reactive Resilience—can get in the way of our need for connection. We instinctively avoid pain, so when we feel vulnerable or misunderstood, we create distance through our Protective Patterns, sometimes hurting those we love most. When we get frustrated, irritated, or angry, we may isolate ourselves or attack others and then feel sad.

Feeling sad is our body’s way of signaling that we are not getting our emotional needs met. We can use our Centering Skills to become balanced, to lessen that negative cycle, and help us build the strong Relational Resilience we want. Our Centering Skills can thus help us improve our relationships. And connecting with others through strong relationships can be one of our most important ways of becoming centered and balanced. Together, they can have a profound effect on our sense of inner strength and wellbeing.

For connecting, but not true for centering, you inherently need the other person to be interested in connecting to build the bridge of connection. Centering is a choice always available to you; connecting involves the will and skill of someone else. Even if you center yourself, and you use your connecting skills, it won’t work if the other person is not interested—at least at that moment. You will then have to assess whether the failure to connect is a “not now” situation (the other person may need to center themselves) or a “not without time and change” situation. (This is not a person with whom you will be able to or will choose to build a connection with if they are unable to operate from a centered place, thus making them available for authentic connection.) Sometimes reaching out to others and holding space for them in a caring manner will allow them to eventually reach back and connect with you.

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How do we connect? Skills for connecting include noticing and listening to others, being empathetic to what they are going through, choosing kindness in our interaction with them, and speaking authentically as a way to build trust.

Now, let us take a deeper look at these five skills, including how they work, how people use them in daily life, how you can develop them through activities, and what you can practice in order to strengthen them.
Noticing Others

Moment of Inquiry: What am I noticing about the other person?
- What am I sensing/feeling about what is happening for them?

Connecting requires taking the time to focus and pay attention to the signals someone is sending us. Their expressions, body language, and tone of voice can all tell us a lot. In fact, studies have shown that more than 55% of communication is body language alone. Can we be curious about who they are and what their story is? When we are open and curious rather than closed or judgemental, we can improve our connections with others. When we notice that friends or colleagues are sending non-verbal signals, it can be helpful to ask them directly how they are doing, to confirm our impressions or clarify assumptions, so we are able to support them appropriately. When we notice others, it gives them a message that we care.

Good communication requires two dimensions of noticing: our feelings AND someone else's feelings and experiences. It is a skillful practice to be noticing our own feelings and simultaneously noticing what another person might be feeling.

When I take the time to notice my wife, I see the stress of her demanding job and caring for our kids. Rather than me snapping at her, I can take a mindful breath and then have a good conversation about how I can support her.

~ Damon, Auditor

Reflective Activity: Pause. What’s The Cause?

When you have a conflict, large or small, take a moment and ask yourself “Pause, What’s the Cause?” When you are trying to connect with someone, notice their body language, tone of voice, and energy level. Are you engaging in a positive way? Is there something that is wrong? Is it something you said? Is it something that you can help with?

1. Think about a situation that happened recently. What was happening for the other person in the situation? What might their emotions be? Can you see the situation from their perspective? Write out what you think the cause is from their perspective.

My colleague has really been bugging me. She micro-manages my work and always seems to try to find something I have done wrong—even when I haven’t. When I take the time to Notice her, I see that she is tired. I remember she told me that her mother has cancer, and she is providing the care for her. It gives me more patience.

~ Miranda, Office Assistant

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Challenge Activity: **Playing with Backstories**

When you are out in public (on the bus, at a park, or at the mall) spend time Noticeing Others. If possible, close your eyes and notice what you hear from others, such as their tone of voice, volume of speech, etc. Observe how others move around you. Do you see any pain? Is someone athletic? How do they carry themselves? Are they making eye contact with others? Play with giving strangers an empathetic “backstory” or empowering narrative based on what you see. When you do this activity with a friend, it can be fun to compare backstories you each created. You will see how we make things up in our minds all the time.

*I notice when I have my phone out I am less able to Notice Others. Sometimes I miss what my girlfriend says because I have been on Insta. I am trying to break the habit.*

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**Practices to Strengthening Noticeing Others:**

- **Notice emotions and attitude.** Notice what you see, feel, and hear in another’s facial expressions, tone of voice, or body language. What are you feeling inside yourself as you notice the other person’s emotions or attitudes?

- **Inquire, confirm and support.** When someone in your life seems sad, you can say, “What are you feeling? Anything you want to share?” Rather than just guessing, when you confirm your impressions of another’s emotions, you can better support them.

- **Take in more information.** When something is sensitive or may be misunderstood in text or email, try to communicate in person or through a video call or phone call—some way to see and hear more fully what is happening for the other person.

- **Notice how you think about others.** Notice when you are using negative words about others. What might an alternative story be? For every negative word you use for that person, choose two positive words. How does that impact how you see them?

*My son was not getting his homework done. All I could think was LAZY, LAZY, LAZY. When I stopped those negative words and started thinking, “creative and out-of-the-box thinker” it was easier for me to calm down and become curious about what was really going on with him. Switching my thinking was a challenge, but it allowed us to have a good conversation about it.*

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*~ Ramundo, Tech Support

~ Fred, Retail Sales*
Heartfelt Listening

Moment of Inquiry: How can I listen to truly understand what someone is trying to communicate?

- Is my heart open to their truth, without judgment?

Heartfelt Listening is a process that requires us to listen non-judgmentally and truly open our hearts to what the other person is saying. Rather than focusing on problem solving, we listen wholeheartedly. Heartfelt Listening might include both verbal and non-verbal signs of listening (such as smiling, nodding or affirming) and it can include repeating back what they are actually saying, (mirroring their words back), showing your connection to them. But most importantly, Heartfelt Listening is about our intentions, when we are really trying to better understand what the other person is feeling or experiencing. Remember, understanding someone else's perspective is different than agreeing to their perspective.

Somebody giving me Heartfelt Listening? I get that when I hangout with my girlfriends. Nobody is coming in and trying to solve our problems. I get to say what is really going on with me and everyone just really listens.

~ LaShonda, College Senior

Practice Activity: Heartfelt Listening Practice

Spend some time practicing Heartfelt Listening with your colleagues, friends or family members. Let them know you are working on this skill.

1. Ask them a question, such as “Tell me about one of your favorite childhood memories.” Then listen without thinking about your response, your own memories, or feelings.
2. Take a moment to really take in what they are feeling. Notice what reciprocal feeling that creates in you. Respond to them from that feeling place. Ask them if they feel heard by what you shared.

To ensure we get in some Heartfelt Listening time in our house, we need to schedule in digital-free times as a family. It can be really hard, as my husband’s work sends him emails at all hours. However, we have found that if we all put our phones in a basket for meals, that works really well. And on Sundays, after soccer practice, the phones go back in the basket. It is not always perfect, but it does feel like we relax better together and have more time to listen to each other.

~ Alicia, Mom of five

Reflective Activity: Reflect on Not Being Heard

Think about a time when a friend, colleague or family member did not really pay attention to what you are saying. How did it feel when they thought they heard you but really did not? How did it impact your relationship?
Think about a time when you did not hear and understand what someone else actually said. How did that impact your relationship?

Challenge Activity: **One Conversation Per Day**

Each day, try to have at least one conversation when your whole attention is on the other person and you are heartfelt listening to what they are saying. With all the distractions of work and home life, this may be harder than you think!

"My mom works really hard to support my brother and me. I really want to help her but there is not much I can do. I have found that her favorite thing is if I just spend a little time with her after dinner, hanging out and really listening to her, before I leave to do homework or hangout with my friends."

~ John, Junior in High School

**Practices to Strengthening Heartfelt Listening:**

- **Start the day listening:** Ask family members or colleagues one thing they are looking forward to and one thing they might need help with.

- **Empathic listening:** When a friend, colleague, or patient is talking with you about something painful in their life, practice heartfelt listening to understand their feelings rather than offering solutions to their problems. Any questions should be to clarify your understanding of their perspective. Sometimes being heard is all the other person needs to solve their own problems.

- **Digital-Free listening:** When you are having a conversation with a friend, colleague or family member, put down your phone and other digital devices and give them your full attention. This allows you to perceive the non-verbal information better and more authentically.

- **Inquiry-based listening:** Ask deeper questions of your friends or family members, in which you really listen to what is going on with them. Suggested questions include "Can you tell me more?" or "Why is that important to you?"

- **“Rose and Thorn” daily check-in:** Each day, perhaps at a meal, ask your family members to name one thing that went well for them and one thing that could have gone better. Spend time heartfelt listening to what is happening in their lives.

"We have been married 48 years. He is really good at Heartfelt Listening with me. It has taken a long time, through all the ups and downs of the business and our kids. But now he knows that the thing I most value in our relationship is when he just hears me, without telling me what he thinks I should do."

~ Sara, Retired Florist

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Empathizing

**Moment of Inquiry:** What is the other person feeling?  
- What does it feel like to truly understand someone?

Empathy is being sensitive to the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of others. It is acknowledging and letting in what someone else is feeling and experiencing. Empathy involves recognizing the emotions of others, taking on their perspective and using that information to guide us. Empathy has both a cognitive component—when we understand and know in our heads what someone is going through—and an emotional component—when we take their emotions into our hearts and feel what it must be like for them. Empathy requires staying out of judgment. At its best, empathy is built upon mutual understanding where we listen and share our deepest beliefs and experiences with others. Empathy is feeling **with** others.

*I love to ride the train to work and just talk to people around me, to learn their stories. It has really helped me develop empathy. A lot of time people have their headphones in, but if they don’t, they might talk. A few people really open up. One guy in a suit told me about his life in a refugee camp and another woman in designer clothes told me about her husband divorcing her and becoming transgender. I never take people’s stories for granted anymore, no matter what they look like. So many people carry a lot.*  

~ Monique, Travel Writer

**Reflective Activity:** **Opening Your Heart**

When paying attention to others with an open heart, you can discover a great deal about what is true for that person. Think about someone in your life and put yourself in their shoes and ask, “what might be true for ______?” What might their life be like, their emotions, thoughts and feelings? Write down what you think their thoughts and feelings are.

*I didn’t like Gino very much—he was always ragging on my politics not to mention my football team! He just acted like a real jerk. Since we have to work together everyday, I needed to get past that. One day, some detail about his journey from El Salvador came up. I asked a few questions, using Heartfelt Listening, and realized that he has had it real tough. It helped me give him some slack. I will never like his politics, but I can give him the benefit of the doubt on other stuff. It makes it easier to work together. And we can trash talk football in a spirit of fun.*  

~ Dan, Foreman
Challenge Activity: **Encouraging Empathy in Others**

When a friend or family member is in conflict, you can help them find empathy. First, acknowledge what is going on for your friend and demonstrate empathy for them. Then, you can have empathy with the other person in the conflict and share your ideas on how the other person may have felt or have them explore how the other person may have felt.

*Lien has a lot of fights with her older sister. I used to fight with my older sister, too, so I have empathy for Lien. But I also shared why her older sister might be freaking out about Lien’s choice to sneak out with boys. Her older sister got involved with some really bad guys by doing that and got really hurt. Lien’s sister may seem harsh but she is trying to protect Lien from that pain. I try to help Lien see that.*

~ Mai, High School Freshman

**Practices to Strengthen Empathizing:**

- **Acknowledge the other person's emotions.** Even if you don't agree with someone's opinion, acknowledging and mirroring the other person's feelings can help you empathize better.

- **Be curious:** When talking with others, see if you can ask questions that allow you to discover how they are feeling about their lives, even in the small moments. Try to keep your questions as a “friendly inquiry” rather than a cross-examination. Heartfelt Listening can help. Try to have a conversation with at least one stranger per week–at the store, the post office, or in line.

- **Find your “blind spots”:** Seek to know what you don’t know about other people’s experiences. Search for commonalities with people who are different from you (different religion, political party, income level, race, etc). When you empathize with differences, you can find pathways to solutions together.

- **Watch, listen to, and read great stories:** When you watch TV shows, listen to or read stories, you are being shown how it feels to be in lives other than our own. Can you feel what it is like to be the people in the stories?

- **Practice having empathy for yourself:** When something is difficult, give yourself empathy by acknowledging what is difficult and that you are in a situation you wish you were not. When we have empathy for ourselves, it is easier to have empathy for others.

*“My favorite way to develop empathy in my children is to go to the library! There are so many books we like to read together. After we read them, I like to ask questions about the characters, like “Why do you think Charlie was so excited about getting the Golden Ticket?” and “Who would you invite to the Chocolate Factory if you had won?” (Hint--they know they better say me! ) Books are such an easy way into the hearts and minds of other people..”*

~ Jeremiah, Father of four

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Dovetail Learning 2020.09.11
Choosing Kindness

Moment of Inquiry: How can I act kindly in this situation?
  ○ How can my kindness help?

In any relationship or situation, we often have moments where we can take a little extra care and choose a kind approach. Kindness is easy to talk about and much harder to do, mostly because we get trapped by our own stressors (time, money, other obligations, etc). However, when we are friendly, generous, and considerate towards others, we help ourselves as well as them. When we make a choice to be kind, that choice gives us a sense of control and satisfaction and empowers us to be our best selves. It also empowers others because it helps them feel loved and valued. It gives them an opportunity to choose kindness as well because kindness creates a virtuous cycle and nurtures our connection.

My whole workplace has changed now that we are on a “random act of kindness” kick. It started out as competition—who could bring in the most cups of mocha for other people or who could send the nicest messages on Slack—but now it has evolved and is part of our culture. People are saying thank you all the time for projects being done, and it has opened up a connection to the custodial staff that wasn’t there before. People are saying nice things in their emails. They are checking in on colleagues having a bad day and just generally offering to support each other. What a different place to work! I actually look forward to coming in every day.

~ Abdulaziz, Lab Tech

Reflective Activity: Choose Kindness for You

Remember a moment in your life when you did not choose kindness. Perhaps you were judgmental or rude? How did it make you feel? How did that impact your perception of the person? How did it change your relationship with that person?

Recall a moment in your life when you DID choose kindness. How did that make you feel? How did that impact your relationship with this person?

Sometimes the best way to be kind is to keep your mouth shut. When I was shopping for food for a weekend away, my girlfriend kept criticizing every product I put in the basket. I was getting pretty frustrated. Then, after taking some deep breaths, I asked myself, “What would help this situation?” And I kept my mouth shut.

~ Felicity, Cafe Barista
Advanced Reflection: **Examining Values**

Choose a moment in your life when you did not choose kindness. Think about why you did not choose kindness. What value of yours was crossed that made you judgmental or unkind? In retrospect, was there a more effective way to handle the situation?

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My work is pretty frantic. We are always running behind on appointments. I had gotten in a bad habit, snapping at the nurses and office assistants, asking them for this and that so we could hurry up and get to the next patient. When I realized how I was killing morale, I made a conscious choice to start being kind with every interaction. Now we are still running late by the end of the day, but our patients are not nearly as cranky about it. Everyone is being nicer in the office and we can all feel it.

~ Carrie, Orthodontist

**Challenge Activity: Complimenting Others**

When you notice something about someone you like or appreciate (an outfit, their kind smile), have the courage to share the compliment. Try to do it at least once every day.

**Practices to Strengthen Choosing Kindness:**

- **Make the choice:** When situations arise, take a moment to consider would make your response kind? Can you take a few extra minutes to help? How might you just be with someone who is upset, or help to reassure them? Can you use a kind tone of voice?

- **Give yourself a pep-talk:** Before going into a challenging situation (a difficult meeting at work, warehouse stores, kid pickup), give yourself a two minute pep talk about how you can make a choice for kindness.

- **Choosing Kindness even in difficult situations:** When you listen with an empathetic heart, it can motivate you to act with kindness. When you see that someone is having a bad day, you can help them, regardless of how you feel about them. How does that make you feel?

- **Switch it up:** If someone snaps at you, can you respond kindly? If you can center yourself and maintain healthy boundaries, sometimes a kind response can diffuse negativity.

We have the most irritable secretary in our office that I have to pass several times a day. She always has a scowl. But every time I pass her, I give her a big smile, a kind word, and sometimes a compliment. She hasn’t gotten much nicer (though sometimes she gives me a slight smile) and it may not change her at all, but it makes my day better when I smile at her.

~ Walter, Education Policy Advocate

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Speaking Authentically

**Moment of Inquiry**: How can I speak my truth in this moment, being open, vulnerable and kind?

Speaking authentically means that we say what we are thinking and feeling even though we feel vulnerable (emotionally, socially, and/or economically). Though it may be difficult, we speak with kindness and strength. We strive to speak authentically because what we say—and how we say it—shapes our experience. The words we speak to others, the words we say to ourselves, and the words we hear all impact how life occurs for us. Tone of voice and attitude also have an impact. Speaking authentically can bring about immense happiness, intimacy, and love, and it can also bring sadness and conflict.

What we don’t say—unsaid missing information—can also cause deep misunderstanding and conflict. Due to cultural and familial patterns, emotions are often the missing information that makes the most difference. Learning how to speak authentically about emotions without blame or judgment can foster intimacy and trust.

Part of speaking authentically is understanding when relationships need repair – when we need to forgive and/or apologize. Apologizing starts with recognizing that what we have done impacts others. Forgiving starts with letting go of the anger or hurt we are feeling (one of our centering skills.) Both are an important part of speaking authentically. When we don’t apologize when we have hurt someone, or when we don’t let go and forgive, we have difficulty with connecting with one another. That difficulty can leak into other, non-related relationships.

> I have learned that to speak authentically, I need to start by forgiving myself. Too often, when I do something wrong, I get caught in a “shame storm” that is a swirl of judgement and blame upon myself. If I don’t forgive myself, I am no good to anyone else and I can’t move forward.

> ~ Diana, Case Manager

I was so mad at my boss that I stayed angry at him for almost two years. After long talks with my dad, I realized that my resentment was eating me up. It was hurting me much more than him. I had to let go of those feelings. It took a lot for me to do it, but now I feel freer. I have not forgotten what he did, and I am never going to work with him again, but I have forgiven him. Now I can speak more authentically to my family and friends because I am not carrying that bitter load.

> ~ William, Insurance Agent

Reflective Activity: **My Truth Gaps**

1. **What information are you withholding from others that might be helpful for them to have?** What would be helpful to say so that others know what is important to you (letting someone know that your feelings were hurt or they crossed a boundary).
2. Why are you afraid to speak? Is it the other person’s reaction? Worry about saying it wrong? When we understand what we are afraid of, it helps to overcome the barrier.

I can usually speak up for other people, but it’s really hard for me to ask for help. I feel like I should be able to do it myself. I don’t want to bother other people, even my friends. It wasn’t until my friend Clara told me that she was upset that I never asked for help that I realized I had it wrong. Speaking authentically means reaching out for help myself, too.

~ Emily, High School Sophomore

Challenge Activity: Mining for Conflict

When something is not working for you, can you tell the person what is not working for you and why? You can share with the other person that something feels "off" and ask if they feel it, too. Even if they don't feel it, you can share what you are experiencing and ask if they can work on it together with you. Often, when you directly ask about potential sources of conflict, it can reduce the negative reactions between you and the other person because you are asking to solve it together.

I am learning to apologize more in my life. I used to focus on my excuses, why I did what I did. Other people would get angry for no good reason, or at least that is what I thought. I have learned that my impact on others matters more than my intention. So rather than just stewing in “but I am right!” or "I didn’t mean it that way!", I say I am sorry. It actually makes me feel better because it lessens the tension. My wife appreciates this change in me the most.

~ Darryl, Retired Engineer

Practices to Strengthen Speaking Authentically:

- **Start small:** In a kind voice, start speaking when small things aren't working for you.
- **Notice what stops you:** When you want to speak up but don't, notice what your body is telling you about why. Are you afraid of being embarrassed? Exposed socially or emotionally? Fired? Sometimes you have to think through potential power dynamics before you can create a path for yourself to speak up. When you know why you are not speaking up, you might be in a stronger position next time.
- **Set boundaries:** In some relationships, you may need to speak authentically about boundaries. You may not be able create a deeper connection, but you can set the boundaries that stop you from becoming more hurt.
- **Practice complete apologies:** When you have hurt someone, even for small offenses, practice by ensuring your apologies have all three components: 1. Express remorse (I'm sorry) 2. Admit your mistake and the impact (I was late and you had to wait) 3. Offer reparations (Is there anything I can do to make up for it?)
- **Start with yourself:** To forgive yourself, start by acknowledging the mistake you made and the pain you caused yourself and others. Think about what was in your control and what was not. Then let go of your offense and work on moving forward.
- **Make your requests clear:** If you can let others know exactly what you need, they will be better able to help you. (Can I have your help to edit this document for one hour today?)
After I blow up at my kids, I apologize for yelling at them and explain it was wrong. I also tell them how their behavior impacted me ("Your fighting in the back seat wears me out after a long day of work" so they understand their part.) Then I tell them I will recenter by breathing mindfully for a few minutes. At least my kids are learning it is okay to make mistakes. And when I hear them follow the same pattern of stopping, apologizing and recentering in conflicts with their friends, I know that at least my learning is being passed on.

~ Albert, Benefits Analyst

Moments of Inquiry:

- **Noticing Others**: What am I noticing about the other person?
  - What am I sensing/feeling about what is happening for them?

- **Heartfelt Listening**: How can I listen to truly understand what someone is trying to communicate?
  - Is my heart open to their truth, without judgment?

- **Empathizing**: What is the other person feeling?
  - What does it feel like to truly understand someone?

- **Choosing Kindness**: How can I act kindly in this situation?
  - How can my kindness help?

- **Speaking Authentically**: How can I speak my truth in this moment, being open, vulnerable and kind?
Practical Collaborating Skills for Group Resilience

**Group Resilience** is the ability to maintain vision, purpose, and collective goals when meeting challenges. Strong Group Resilience empowers each person to express themselves safely and freely, maximizing everyone’s contributions.

Groups gather—as colleagues, family, or friends—for all sorts of reasons: to work, learn, celebrate, create, mourn, or to support each other. When groups gather to accomplish a shared purpose, achieving their common goal is easier if they use strong collaborating skills. Working well with others requires shifting from an individual lens to a shared perspective, so collaborating requires a special blend of noticing oneself, noticing other individuals, and noticing the interactions among the group.

Groups are shaped by two central forces operating simultaneously:

1. **Content** and goals of the group
2. **Culture** and dynamics within the group

**Content** can be the easier part, as most groups have a self-defined purpose like scoring a goal, having fun, planning an event, completing a work task, or changing the world.

**Culture** or group dynamics tend to be more complicated as it is made up of both overt and hidden interactions among group members. Each person’s part is essential to the whole and each person affects the group through their contributions, what they notice, and what they say or don’t say to each other. One or two people can swing a group in a positive or negative direction.

Facilitating the culture and dynamics of a group is what collaborating skills are all about.

When a group is collaborating well, each person contributes their own experience and perspective to the effort and can support other people’s ideas and contributions. With a shared mission and purpose, people's energy and enthusiasm build on each other to foster creativity and excitement. The whole becomes far greater than the sum of the parts.

Collaboration builds upon **centering** and **connecting**. When we practice our own centering skills while being committed to connecting through strong relationships, we can be in service to the group’s goals with strength and clarity. Strong groups hold each other in a container of safety and trust, which inspires creativity, productivity, and joy.
How do we collaborate? Skills for collaborating include paying attention to the needs of everyone in the group, appreciating differences and multiple perspectives, and jointly seeking and honoring agreements for how to work together to achieve goals. Collaborative groups value each person’s contribution (as well as their leadership) and use integrity as the north star on which success is based.

Let’s take a deeper look at these five skills, including how they work, how people use them in daily life, how you can develop them through activities, and how practice can strengthen them.

Note that since collaborating is a group skill, some of our activities are created for a group to do together. These group activities will require a facilitator, which we suggest you choose before starting the activity. If multiple people are skilled at facilitation, it is good to share the responsibility and rotate facilitators.

Collaborating effectively is the most incredible feeling. When our team is in sync it feels like we can do anything together. When we are off our game, work is like sludge. It takes one of us to stop everything so we can recenter and get into the flow again.

~ Mateo, Systems Manager

Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.

~ Helen Keller
Noticing Group

**Moment of Inquiry:** What am I sensing/feeling about the whole group?
- What am I noticing about group members?

When we are in a group with a shared purpose, noticing the emotions and reactions of others is key to creating a group culture that generates ideas and achieves its purpose. A group as a whole has a feel or 'mood'. The way individuals are centered and connected influences this tremendously. Some questions to consider about the overall 'feel' of the team could be: Are the group members ready to engage with each other and the purpose of the group? What is their energy level? Are they focused? What do they need before they can interact well? As with **Noticing Others**, "Noticing Group" means paying attention to others’ emotions, expressions, body language (nonverbal cues), and tone of voice, as well as what they say or do not say.

To "read" the group well, **Noticing Myself** comes first. If we aren’t centered ourselves, we often impact the group dynamics negatively. How do we feel when we are in this group? Are we centered? Do we feel connected with at least a few members of the group? Do we feel included and safe? Do we feel engaged and ready to work?

*We sometimes think that when our team starts meetings, we can jump directly into the work together and leave all other parts of our life behind. We think there is a division between work and home. But there is not. If we check in with each other, even briefly, it helps us to collaborate better. Our work goes better when we share first.*

~ Roseanne, Medical Clinic Manager

**Individual Reflective Activity: Noticing My Awareness**

If you have not felt seen or heard, how does that impact you? How can you help others not have that feeling?

*When we plan our ski trips, Dexter has the loudest voice and takes control. I wish that he would listen to the rest of us sometimes. All the meals seem to be meat-centric, even though I have been a vegan for 5 years. And I know Josh has trouble getting away Friday morning; it would be so much easier on him if we left later.*

~ Ron, Sales Associate
Individual Activity: **Pause. What’s The Cause?**

When you have a conflict, large or small, take a moment and ask yourself to "Pause. What’s the Cause?" What are the components of the situation? What is happening for others that is contributing to the situation? Can you see the situation from another's perspective? Our *Connecting Skills of Listening* and *Empathizing* help us understand the situation from other perspectives and thus to be stronger collaborators. Write what you think the cause/source of the conflict is from all perspectives.

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*My mother and my husband fight over the kids’ bedtime. My mother wants them in bed by 7:30 pm sharp, which I get because she watches them every day while we are working. My husband wants more time to play with them when he gets home from work.*

~ Maria Valeria, Call Center Specialist

Group Activity: **Take The Pulse**

(This activity will need a group facilitator.)

Facilitator: Pass out blank index or note cards and ask the group to answer three questions:

- What is the primary personality trait of this group? (Examples: light-hearted, hard-working, thoughtful, creative, attentive to detail, bickering, withholding, untrustworthy)
- What is the primary role you play in the group? (Example: Keep people on track, ask questions, tell stories, bring order to ideas, take notes, follow orders)
- Does everyone have a role? Why or why not?

Individual Practices to Strengthen Noticing the Group:

- **In the moment noticing.** When entering a room with a group, scan and notice what each member of the group is telling you through their body language, expression, and tone. What are they communicating outside of their words? Are they ready to participate?
- **Noticing what you think and how you feel about others.** Notice when you are judging other members of the group in your own mind (negative self-talk). Practice pausing your judgments and changing your thought patterns to being curious and seeking understanding about their situation.

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Group Practices to Strengthen Noticing the Group:

- **Start together.** Since we all bring our whole selves into groups (including emotional baggage from other parts of our lives), it helps us to both understand each other’s perspectives and center ourselves if we just quickly name what is actually going on for us. Before starting a group meeting or sports practice, ring a bell and invite everyone to do 30 seconds of breathing mindfully. Ring the bell again and go around the circle with everyone describing their current state of being in one word or phrase.

- **How full is our resilience bucket?** Groups grow together when we are honest about how we are showing up. You can share how full your resilience bucket is by inviting each person to describe the level of their resilience bucket in a percentage like they would describe the charge on a phone, (“My resilience is about 20% today, or 50%, or 90”), or say a number from 1-10 that describes their readiness to be present.

- **“Rose and thorns” reflection.** At the end of the day, everyone in the group describes one positive and one not so positive thing that happened to them that day.

  I really learned to Notice the Group after I became a mom. By reading my children’s emotions, I learned to predict their behavior. If my younger son was frustrated about something, he would pick on his older sister. If my daughter was disappointed, she would refuse to eat. By Noticing the Group, I became motivated to get ahead of bad behavior. I started asking my children about their emotions and helping them talk about them, which helped some of the negative behavior disappear.

  Joanna, Claims Processor
Appreciating Others

Moment of Inquiry: What do I appreciate about others’ genius, qualities, and skills?
- What contributions do they bring to the group?

Taking the time to appreciate others, both in our thoughts and in our words, helps us to notice and express being grateful for those aspects that we enjoy about others. When we express appreciation to others, we are Choosing Kindness and connecting with others, which can help them feel more included in a group. When people feel appreciated and valued, they feel more comfortable contributing innovative ideas and often work harder for the goals of the group. Appreciating others can also help dispel small annoyances or create empathy for them and their situation. When we welcome people to a meeting or event or welcome new members to our group in a manner that demonstrates appreciation, it sets a tone that has long-lasting benefits.

Individual Reflective Activity: Appreciating Mindset

Think about each member of your family, work colleagues, sports team, or another group. What do you appreciate about that person? What positive attributes do they contribute to the group?

Next time you interact with them, mention something you appreciate about them. Notice how your appreciation impacts you and your relationship with them. With practice, appreciation can become a mindset that we do both internally (in our self-talk) and directly with others regularly.

My operational team was so competitive that the workplace almost felt toxic. In an effort to help people understand how much we need each other to function well, we started offering appreciation at the beginning of each meeting. It took a few months, but it started moving us toward a healthier culture.

~ Georgia, Regional Operational Director

Individual or Group Activity: Welcome Checklist

A checklist to welcome new team members communicates that everyone is valued. Create a checklist for your group. Examples include:
- Sending a pre-arrival email or note
- Displaying a sign, note, or small swag to greet them
- Ensuring their needed tools and equipment are ready
- Providing them a training plan
- Introducing them to other team members and showing them around
- Welcoming them through a coffee, lunch, or happy hour gathering
- Communicating 30-day expectations or goals clearly
We were going through new hires faster than a hot knife through butter. They kept quitting after a few days. I knew our pay was at the market rate, so I looked for what else I could do. I put together a welcome checklist so that every new hire had a welcome note, a nice welcome sign, and a training plan. I personally introduced them to everyone and even took them out to lunch on the first day. Wouldn’t ya know—we haven’t had one person quit since we started welcoming them like that!

~ Sam, Fulfillment Supervisor

Group Activity: **Caring Circle**
*(This activity will need a group facilitator.)*

All of us have people we carry in our hearts—we have heard about their struggles (loss of a job, physical or mental illness, or other challenges), and we care about them and wish we could help them. With colleagues, family members, or friends, a Caring Circle acts as a visual reminder of this “circle of empathy,” as it holds those that are of concern to us who are currently in our hearts and minds.

**Facilitator:** To create a Caring Circle, draw a big circle on a piece of paper or a whiteboard. Group members speak the names of people who are in their hearts with a short sentence about the struggles of the named person. Write those names on stickies and add them to the Caring Circle. In workplaces or homes, a visual Caring Circle can be posted in a visible place to serve as a reminder of those we carry in our hearts. The Caring Circle can be updated regularly (daily or weekly).

Our teaching staff started using the Caring Circle. We update it together at the beginning of staff meetings, and sometimes people add names during lunch. It helps me give some slack to some other teachers. When I know what is going on in their lives, I can appreciate them more.

~ Jill, Third Grade Teacher

Group Activity: **Appreciation Nameplate**
*(This activity will need markers and blank paper folded lengthwise in half.)*

Each person writes their name large on one side of their paper so people can see it on the other side of the circle. Pass around the nameplates, so that other group members can write down 1-2 words describing something they appreciate about that person. Display the nameplate in front of each member.

My children were arguing all the time and my wife was at her wit’s end. Luckily, we had just started an activity before meetings at work, that I thought might work at home. While we eat dinner, everyone is supposed to say one appreciation about the person on their left, and it has to be something no one else has said that month. My children sometimes get silly—“I appreciate that my brother doesn’t smell so bad tonight” but even that adds laughter to our meal. And sometimes they are very touching: “I appreciate that Ester gave me a hug when I was scared.”

~ Farhad, Special Investigator

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Individual Practices to Strengthen Appreciating Others:

- **Modeling appreciations.** Try to say a different appreciation to each person in your group or family, at least once per week. When you get in the habit of speaking or writing appreciations regularly, people feel more valued and connected to the group and its goals.

- **Written appreciations.** Send an email, card, or note to someone you haven’t seen for a while, telling them what you appreciate about them.

Group Practices to Strengthen Appreciating Others:

- **Appreciation pass off.** Start meetings or meals with an appreciation pass off: Every person says something they appreciate about the person on their left. Switch directions the next time you do the activity.

- **Ping pong appreciation.** Break up long meetings with this quick, fun activity. In pairs, people toss ping pong balls back and forth, giving each other an appreciation with each toss. Rotate pairs after 30 seconds.

- **Shout Out Appreciation.** Give specific Shout Outs at the end of every meeting or event, thanking people for their particular contribution and to those in the group who are modeling positive group collaboration.
Seeking Agreements

Moment of Inquiry: What explicit agreements do we need so we can work well together and achieve our purpose?

- What are my assumed agreements that I have not explicitly stated?
- How can I seek and name agreements to support our co-creating?

Working well with others requires that everyone agrees on the purpose and goals of the work. Additionally, collaboration is more successful if the group has agreements for the two types of process:

1) **Task agreements for getting the work done:** who will be doing the different tasks involved and how and when will they do it?

2) **Culture agreements, for how group members will interact with each other:** how does the group want to be with each other – group tone, interaction, communication, and etiquette norms?

**Culture is the emotional glue that holds us all together.**

Many times, we tend to fall into implicit expectations instead of making explicit agreements. The result is too often these unexpressed assumptions and expectations about the goals and process derail collaboration, creating misunderstandings and hurt feelings. How often have you found yourself saying to someone, “But I thought you were going to do [fill-in-the-blank]” even though there was never an explicit task agreement between you and the other person. And even if you have agreements on who is going to do what, your expectations about communication and style can cause tension: “Why didn’t you let me know [fill-in-the-blank].” Though it may feel unnecessary and irrelevant, creating agreements with others, using a common language, ensures that everyone knows what is expected and usually saves time in the long run. Setting up these “road signs” keeps everyone going in the same direction.

Agreements help create an open and respectful environment in which teams work together creatively and individuals feel safe to freely share their ideas and opinions. The best time to negotiate group agreements is at the beginning of their formation, but even groups who have been together a while can benefit by starting or reviewing interaction agreements at any time. And agreements can be as important in a family or a friendship group as they are in a work environment, especially if the group is planning an event.

Miscommunication and conflict are sometimes a function of a lack of clear distinctions around boundaries and areas of authority. In any given situation, we need to be clear about what is and what isn’t okay with us, as well as what we need. Letting others know how their actions impact us is essential in maintaining a collaborative and safe environment. How does it feel when someone offers a judgemental opinion about something they weren’t invited to comment on? Context and agreements need to be established so as not to cross unknown or unspoken boundaries. And agreements need to be revisited on a regular and ongoing basis as people and context change.

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In my last job, I came into an organization that avoided conflicts and there were few explicit agreements. It was horrible. There was no agreement about starting meetings on time and so some people constantly kept the rest of us waiting. After working with a consultant, we were able to get our meeting agreements written down. My colleagues felt safe enough to talk about how latecomers impacted the rest of us, and we began starting meetings on time. It was a small step in the right direction.

~ Jackie, Business Manager

Individual Reflective Activity: Agreements in Hindsight

Think about group activities that you have done recently—perhaps with your family, at work, or with friends. Was everyone in agreement about what you were going to do in advance? Did you spell out the agreements clearly? If not, were some people disappointed or frustrated with how the activity occurred? What agreements might have been helpful to avoid this?

I took a trip to London with some friends from college. The first day or two went great, but then everyone started getting into arguments. Some people thought we would be seeing everything on their “must-see” list. Others wanted to be spontaneous and explore off the beaten path. I wished we had made some agreements before we left.

~ Darnell, Account Manager

Group Activity: Defining Group Purpose & Goals

(This activity will need a group facilitator.)

Facilitator: Pass out blank index or note cards and ask the group two questions:

1. What do you think is the purpose of the group?
2. What do you think are the goals of the group?

People are not required to put their name on their card. When completed, the cards are passed back to the facilitator who reads the cards out loud one at a time. A flip chart can be used to organize the responses as the group compares the answers and considers what the similarities and differences mean. Can the group find commonalities in the answers provided?
Many members of our team have worked in our clinic for a long time. There is a lot of pressure because our patients are low-income and have stressful lives. I think people had gotten so used to the poor morale they didn’t think we could change it. But after we came up with a mission, vision, and agreements, our team meetings really improved. The agreements weren’t radical—they included things like “Put your phone away for meetings.” and “Communicate changes to all members as soon as you know them.” But even these simple agreements made people more accountable. It helped us to be our best with each other, instead of our worst.

~ Clark, Family physician

Group Activity: **Culture Agreement Alignment**

*(This activity will need a group facilitator.)*

**Facilitator:** Help members brainstorm and write down on a chart pad agreements for “How we want to be together.” If there are more than 15 ideas, the group might want to sort and prioritize for the top 10, as more than 10 are difficult to put in operation. Once the list is complete, have group members commit to each agreement to support the culture of your group. Common examples include one person speaking at a time with no side conversations; listen without judgment; always have a right to pass from speaking; keep confidentiality.

*We created a set of family agreements when my daughter was young. They really helped us interact with each other in a more positive way, instead of just reacting every time she did something we didn’t like (and vice versa). She definitely called us out if we were breaking the agreements like Mommy, you agreed not to take phone calls during dinner! Now that she is older, we have modified some of the wording in the agreements but the principles still help us.*

~ Patricia, Warehouse Supervisor

**Individual Practices to Strengthen Seeking Agreements:**

- **Create SMART goals:** *Specific, Measureable, Actionable, Relevant, and Timely.* SMART goals are great building blocks for success. For more information and examples, see dovetailllearning.org/resources

**Group Practices to Strengthen Seeking Agreements:**

- **Create task agreements.** For more information and examples, see dovetailllearning.org/resources
- **Create culture agreements:** For more information and examples, see dovetailllearning.org/resources
- **Posting agreements.** After your group has defined its agreements, put them at the top of every meeting agenda, or post them in your meeting or break rooms.
- **Reviewing agreements.** It is extremely helpful to speak agreements aloud on a timely basis. Set a regular time for this to be done in a structured way (once a week, before a specific activity like a team or family meeting). Take turns having someone read the agreements aloud so everyone can see, hear, and feel their relevance. This is especially important when a new member of the group enters into collaboration with a group.
Honoring Agreements

Moment of Inquiry: How do I honor my agreements with integrity?

- How can I best hold myself and others accountable to agreements with mutual respect?

Honoring agreements involves taking ownership of your word. Your word is what allows you to make a personal commitment to a group’s purpose and goals. Honoring agreements is closely connected to Speaking Authentically. It involves saying what you mean and doing what you say. It doesn’t mean you will never make a mistake or miss a deadline. Rather, it means communicating clearly and in a timely way what you can and cannot do so that others know what to expect of you. Being clear in our communication is both kind and extraordinarily helpful.

Making a commitment to something is one of the most powerful acts we can make. The trust and respect others give you is often determined by how your actions match your words. Most important is keeping your commitment “up to date.” We all say we are going to do something with the best intentions and then something happens that keeps us from doing it. This becomes a break in integrity only if we don’t communicate the change to those we promised. Honoring your word is about communicating when you know you cannot do something you said you would do.

When we fail to honor our agreements, it doesn’t mean we are bad people. Moving into guilt and shame is not conducive to learning or collaborating. Instead, when we work to understand our own situation and what happened, and resolve to learn from it, we are freer to apologize for any hurt caused by our actions. Centering ourselves with empathy and self-forgiveness helps us to respectfully honor our agreements with others.

Holding others accountable for what they say and do or don’t do is part of honoring agreements. Giving others a “pass” (i.e., overprotecting or shielding them) doesn’t allow them to grow and learn from their mistakes. Holding someone accountable means asking for clear communication, while seeking understanding, without judgment. Accountability is about closing the communications loop. When we don’t hold others accountable, we have incomplete communication, which can lead to mistakes, misunderstandings, and mistrust.

Honoring agreements does NOT mean agreements are set in stone. The best agreements are evolving and changing, where all involved are doing their best, and also willing to speak up when the agreements are not working so they can be renegotiated.

Coach Teresa has really focused on Honoring Agreements with our team. Our previous coach was really about winning at all costs. I like winning too, but I have come to learn that integrity matters more in the long run. We have an agreement that we won’t go out before a big game, but will chill in our rooms and hit the sack early. When Coach found out one of our star players partied until late before the championship, she benched her. That shocked us but the memory will stay with us. The best part? We won anyway!

~ Jamilla, college freshman
Individual Reflective Activity: **Honoring My Word**

1. How does it feel when you do not keep your word? How does it feel when someone else does not keep their word?

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*My boss likes to act like he is a hotshot, but he doesn’t know what people say behind his back. He continually promises the moon and of course can’t keep those promises. Since no one can trust him, we aren’t very inspired to do the work.*

~ Gabrieilla, associate manager

Individual Reflective Activity: **Honoring Agreements**

Consider the impact of honoring your agreements, or when you or others neglect to honor agreements. How does it feel to tell someone you will do something and then not do it? What is the impact on you and others when you complete something on time and a job well done? How does it feel when someone has committed to an appointment with you and doesn’t show up or is very late? Or a teammate has committed to finishing a project and doesn’t tell you they can’t make the deadline?

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*I adore Alicia but she drives me crazy because she always takes over our group plans without checking with anyone else. I admire all she does for everyone else, but I get really tense when we make plans because I know she will decide we are going to a different place, do a different activity, or move the time. I am going to try to speak authentically to her, to tell her how her “spontaneity” makes me feel, and see if we can come up with an agreement that she will check with me before changing our plans.*

~ Lysandra, HR Director

**Group Activity: Scenarios For Honoring Agreements**

(This activity will need a group facilitator.)

In your group, choose one of the following scenarios, and role-play it as if there were no agreements. With Seeking Agreements (see above) and Honoring Agreements in mind, role-play the scenario a second time with a different ending that demonstrates how to seek and honor agreements. Discuss what is the same and what is different in the two role plays. What did you learn? What do you learn together?
• Your girlfriend is perpetually late to every social gathering your group plans. People are starting to talk behind her back. What do you tell her?
• Your husband is cranky every time you go out with your colleagues after work. You had a late work meeting that has gotten canceled and your buddies are encouraging you to join them for a drink. What do you do?
• Your team member has been absent a lot. When you checked the records, you realized the absences average two days/week for two months. What do you say to the person?
• Your principal has been trying to lay off one of your fellow teachers who speaks out too much. The principal offers to move some of your most difficult students to the other teacher’s classroom. What do you say?
• Your teenage son wants to make the hockey team but probably is not quite good enough. Your uncle employs the coach’s spouse. What do you say?
• The clinic director has put out a memo, promising patients will be seen within 15 minutes of arrival or the doctor involved will get docked on their performance review. The doctor you support is always running late because she is trying to support struggling patients. What do you do?

Individual Practices that Help Strengthening Honoring Agreements:

• **Holding each other accountable**: When someone has not met an agreement, it is helpful to be curious about where things stand and ask directly. Inquiring about the undone task or unmet cultural agreement makes room for a clarifying conversation. It also lets the other person know that you care enough to say something.
• **Mining for conflict**: If you search for what is not working in a group and speak up about it openly, clarification becomes easier. Inquiring authentically about hidden (or not so hidden) conflict reduces reactivity between you and others because you are asking to solve it together. When something is not working for you, how open are you to communicating about what is not working for you and why?
• **Update communication**: As soon as you know that you can’t meet a deadline, communicate clearly that you can’t and update others on when you can commit to having it done, or partially done if appropriate.

Group Practices that Help Strengthening Honoring Agreements:

• **Regular communication**: We find ourselves most often “out of agreements” if we have too many competing priorities and are “fighting fires” all the time. Checking in regularly and comparing progress to priorities helps all involved to build accountability.
• **Renegotiating agreements**: In groups that have been together a while, it is good practice to revisit your interaction agreements regularly. The people involved or the context might have changed, or group members may have just forgotten some of the agreements. After you discuss them, the group can make new commitments to the revised set of agreements.
Contributing Intentionally

**Moment of Inquiry:** Is my contribution to the group adding value?

Collaboration involves imagining together a future state: whether it is a small project finished in an hour or a dream that will last beyond one’s lifetime. It takes courage and vulnerability to share our ideas, especially if they are not completely formed. At the same time, if we are truly to co-create, we may have to let go of a cherished idea, listen fully to others, and invite their talents and ideas.

Good collaboration requires groups to operate as one functioning unit, with everyone playing a useful role to help forward the group’s goals or agenda. Some roles are formal and some are informal. The roles might be flexible, changing from interaction to interaction, or even within the same meeting. If we are Noticeing Others in the group, we can be intentional about our contributions and play roles that are needed.

One of the most obvious roles in groups is leadership, which points the group towards its goals and ensures everyone is playing a contributing part. Some groups have individual leaders and others share leadership. Even in groups with named leaders, people may emerge who are skilled at facilitating and showing the way forward. Leaders also need followers, who offer their skills, talents, and experience in support of the goal. Sometimes the best contribution is to not “enter the fray” with your opinion but to let others carry the discussion or make the decision, especially if others are more impacted or have more experience or knowledge. This is also true in families – parents are the natural "leadership" role but good parenting involves listening and sometimes following the lead of the children.

At the same time, there are many more subtle roles that can be critical to a group achieving its goals: Who is asking the tough questions? Who is playing devil’s advocate and helping avoid “groupthink?” Who is the connector, ensuring team members feel inspired to work together? Who is bringing in the light-heartedness? Who is willing to be vulnerable and bring to the group’s attention some of the undercurrents that might derail the group? In well-functioning groups, everyone is empowered to contribute.

**Individual Reflective Activity:** **Don’t be shy. Let it fly.**

Sometimes, we know what we want to say, but our own insecurities or self-doubt get in the way of contributing. It takes courage to be vulnerable by sharing your ideas by offering up something new to a group. No one benefits from your genius – your unique and valuable perspective – if you don’t ‘let your ideas fly.’ Can you think of a time when you wanted to say something but didn’t? What was it that prevented you from contributing? Could the outcome have been different if you had said something or taken action?
When I was growing up, my older sister Lisa Marie took the lead on everything. I followed her around and we got into lots of high jinxes together. But I got in a bad habit of just being a follower and never giving my suggestions. It is only in the last 10 years or so that I have gained enough confidence to speak my ideas. I planned a vacation together with Lisa Marie last year and she was so happy to be my follower for once. I actually have a better relationship with my sister. Now I am contributing my thoughts in work meetings, too, so I am doing much better in my career.

~ Emmy Lou, Events Planning Support

Challenge Activity—Individual Reflective Activity: Three-Legged Stool

Each person affects the dynamic of the whole group. Think about a group of which you are a part. What happens when one person is absent from the group, or if that person changes their role? How does that impact the dynamic in the group? Who picks up the role? What happens if the role is left empty?

I’m so impressed by the leadership capacities of my team. My colleagues always step up and show the way forward for the whole team. This would not be possible if we did not have the strong bonds from all the sharing we have done over time, both in the hard times and in the fun times.

~ Carl, Executive Director

Group Activity: Name Informal Roles

(This activity will need a group facilitator.)

The facilitator explains the activity: People naturally play unofficial, informal roles along with official ones. Examples include “Counselor,” “Chronic Optimist,” “Deep Listener,” “Truth Teller,” “Cheerleader,” “Insta Homie,” “Jill of All Trades,” “Switch Hitter,” and “Solution Seeker.” Now, think about each team member, and name positive, informal roles that you think that person plays for our team. Document the role discussion and review and revise over time. Do informal roles change as the group learns more about each other?

Our team was having trouble hitting its delivery goals and the tension made us squabble more with each other. A simple trick that Tyrone used to help us see our group dynamics was for us to name our informal roles in the team. It seems I am the “Timeline Enforcer.” It was a fun exercise and helped us settle in our informal roles better. We make more progress now on our delivery goals and get along better too.

~ Kevin, Production Manager

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Practices to Strengthen Contributing Intentionally

● **Practice leadership.** Take turns facilitating meetings or planning events. When you trade the role of leadership with others, everyone learns how it feels to play a different role.

● **Shout outs to honor contribution.** Give shout-outs to your team members when you see them providing good leadership, facilitation, or supporting roles.

● **Pause to Notice.** When the group gets stuck, intentionally pause (ring the bell and take a minute to regroup) and then inquire about what is working well and what is needed next?
Moments of Inquiry:

- **Noticing Group:** What am I sensing/feeling about the whole group? What am I noticing about group members?
- **Appreciating Others:** What do I appreciate about others’ genius, qualities, and skills? What contributions do they bring to the group?
- **Seeking Agreements:** What explicit agreements do we need so we can work well together and achieve our purpose? What are my assumed agreements that I have not explicitly stated? How can I seek and name agreements to support our co-creating?
- **Honoring Agreements:** How do I honor my agreements with integrity? How can I best hold myself and others accountable to agreements with mutual respect?
- **Contributing Intentionally:** Is my contribution to the group adding value?

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.

~ Margaret Mead