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EMOTIONAL BALANCE WORKSHEETS

This collection of worksheets can be used together in sequence or individually to help build a strong repertoire of skills for managing emotions. Included are the following:

- **Daily Practice Identifying Thoughts and Feelings**
Guides the exploration of not only the difference between thoughts and feelings, but also how your own unique thoughts and feelings strengthen one another, for better and for worse, so you can begin to work with them in ways that help you feel more positive emotions.
- **Needs Versus Desires**
Helps build awareness of how you talk to yourself and others about your preferences and needs. This supports strong communication with others.
- **Holding Steady Self-Coaching Worksheet**
Guides a process for self-coaching during a tough conversation and will support the ability to stay in a conversation longer and stronger, even when things don't entirely go your way.
- **Time-Out Exercise**
A necessary part of anyone's toolkit, this detailed guide explains how the functioning of the self-protective brain works against your ability to stay in a hard conversation and how to work with your brain's function rather than against it. Includes a step-by-step guide for taking a time-out, including what to do during the time-out and how to reapproach, and why.
- **Challenging the Thought/Feeling/Meaning Spiral**
A robust guide that explains how emotions and thoughts work together to create meaning, narrative, or story in our lives, and how to increase happiness and balance by taking control of this process in a powerful way. Equally applicable to any emotional experience, this handout focuses on jealousy.



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DAILY PRACTICE IDENTIFYING THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

For the purposes of self-awareness and clarity of communication, I'd like to invite you to practice identifying thoughts and feelings and keep the two categories separate in a deliberate manner. For example:

- Several times a day, as a regular practice, ask yourself, "What do I feel right now?" Jot down a few notes. Just make sure the words you write down are feeling words. Examples include happy, sad, excited, worried, fearful, etc.
- Then write down some thoughts you are thinking that enhance those feelings, for better or worse. For instance, if you identified a feeling of worry, look for the thoughts that enhance worry for you right now. Examples might include thoughts like, "I'll never get this project done" or "My partner doesn't love me like they used to." Whatever the thoughts are that match the emotion, write them down.
- Start noticing the difference between thoughts and feelings. Notice how the thoughts strengthen the feelings and the feelings invite thoughts that support them. But thoughts and feelings are not the same thing; noticing the difference is very important.
- Once you can tell the difference between a thought and a feeling, you can start playing with these ideas. When you do that, I suspect you will notice you have more control than you think you do when it comes to emotional experience. For instance, if you would prefer to feel a different feeling, practice writing down the thoughts that go with the new feeling and see if you can shift your emotional state deliberately. This takes some practice but is extremely liberating. For example, if you would like to experience a feeling of happiness, ask yourself what thoughts would create happiness for you. Lying doesn't work, so you will need to look for happy-making thoughts that are also true. To give you the idea, here are some thoughts that support happy feelings for me:



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- When I look around me, I notice beauty (list the beautiful things) and take joy in that beauty. I love the feeling of sunshine on my face. I love the feeling of my cat's fur and his purring. I love cooking some yummy food and then eating it. You get the idea; find things that bring up happy feelings and focus on them. Notice your ability to generate happy feelings on purpose.
- If you have difficulty thinking up thoughts that generate emotions you would like to experience, ask someone else what they think about to generate that emotion in themselves. Then, see if you can do it the way they do. Another way to investigate this is to imagine or remember a time when you felt the emotion and ask yourself what you were thinking in that scenario. You might also imagine watching a movie in which someone is experiencing the emotion you would like to experience: what are they thinking?
- Ask yourself, "What would I enjoy right now? What sounds like fun to me?" These questions will get you in touch with your unique preferences, which are an important aspect of yourself. Another way to do this is to identify a choice you have between two options and ask yourself which would be more enjoyable. Then choose the more enjoyable one, if at all possible. This will give you practice noticing what you prefer and, ideally, some practice acting on your preference.
- Some people find it easiest to check in with themselves and get grounded first thing in the morning before tackling the day. The following are some writing prompts that are designed to help you get grounded in your unique self before the day gets complicated. Experiment with some of them and see if you like them.
 - I am grateful for _____.
 - I am looking forward to _____.
 - The kind of person I want to be today is _____.
 - Thoughts I want to think today are _____.



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- Five enjoyable, beautiful, or pleasant things around me right now are _____.
- The sensations I'm experiencing in my body right now are _____.
- The emotions or feelings I'm experiencing right now are _____.
- I would like to feel _____ , and some thoughts that bring that feeling up are _____.



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NEEDS VERSUS DESIRES

We often use the word “need” to communicate that something is important to us. Unfortunately, that word can feel a bit like an ultimatum to the listener. It can invite defensiveness or a guarded response, which is the last thing you want when something is really important to you.

Hard conversations with your partner will go better if you figure out how to discuss *desires and preferences* rather than *needs*, even when it comes to things that feel important to you. This exercise is intended to help you practice reframing statements in terms of desires and preferences rather than needs.

1. Write down a list of the things you strongly desire. Anything you have told someone you “need” should go on this list.
2. Rewrite each item on your list in a sentence that expresses something about desire, preference, and hopes. For example, you might write, “I would really love to experience (fill in the blank).”
3. Add a phrase that addresses the importance of the issue or how strong your feelings are about the topic and why it feels important to you. Using the aforementioned example, you might continue, “I feel strongly about this because (describe why it feels important to you).”
4. Any time you notice yourself thinking or saying “I need,” challenge yourself to figure out a way to express your desire and preference. Make sure you also express the importance of the issue to you. The point isn’t to minimize the importance or remove a sense of urgency, but rather to express your preferences and add emphasis in ways that aren’t as likely to result in defensiveness.



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HOLDING STEADY SELF-COACHING WORKSHEET

Thoughts lead to feelings, which is why self-talk or, in other words, careful management of thoughts is such a powerful tool for staying steady in a difficult situation or conversation. Imagine you have an internal coach who can give you just the right pep talk for any given situation. That internal coach might have to interrupt your internal heckler to get a word in edgewise, but the effort will pay off because good coaching really makes a difference in how well we perform.

Imagine being at the gym, lifting weights. Your internal heckler starts up: “You’re so weak, you can’t lift anything. I don’t even know why you try. You’ll never amount to anything. You don’t look as good as all these other people at the gym either. You shouldn’t have even bothered coming.” Obviously, with coaching like that, you will have to work 10 times as hard to make any progress at all.

Okay, now imagine replacing your heckler with a good coach, someone who inspires you to keep going, compliments your effort, and supports your growth: “Look at you go! You’re amazing! You’ve definitely got this. Everyone feels tired sometimes; just focus and see if you can do one more rep. You’re making a strong, healthy, beautiful body with perfect muscles!”

Now imagine you’re in a different type of challenging situation. You’re having a hard conversation with your partner. The two of you disagree, and you’re trying to manage your emotional responses and really understand what your partner is telling you without getting angry and defensive or shutting down. What kind of coaching do you want to provide for yourself in this situation?

Write down a list of things your internal coach might say that would help you stay with the conversation a little longer and a little stronger.



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Here are a few examples for you to consider. Feel free to rewrite them to fit your circumstances and eliminate any that don't fit for you. Add your own if you can. The only requirement is that your internal coaching should help you stay steady, inspired, and focused on being your best self, even when it is hard.

- “I will make up my own mind in the end, but until then, I’m going to explore everything I can.”
- “I can do this. I am strong enough to hear the truth from my partner. I am strong enough to stay with the conversation and show up with my true self, and my true opinions.”
- “No one is forcing me to do anything I don’t want to. Thinking, talking, and imagining are not the same as acting.”
- “I can run an experiment and see how it goes, and then I can revise the plan until we come up with something that works for all of us.”
- “My vote is the deciding vote in my own life and decisions.”
- “If the relationship doesn’t work out, I want to know I explored all possibilities and really deeply came to understand my partner’s perspective.”

See if you can distill your self-coaching to two or three really powerful statements. Put them somewhere prominent: write them on your hand for the day or week or put them in your notes on your phone or on an index card in your wallet. Look at these powerful coaching statements any time you feel wobbly. Don't let the heckler get too far out front; get the compassionate coach in there to help you!



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TIME-OUT EXERCISE

Reptile Brain Review

Having a time-out strategy in place is crucial for managing escalation in difficult situations and hard conversations. We all have a limbic system and a lizard brain, the parts of the brain Dan Siegel describes as the “downstairs brain,” or “thumb,” and the brainstem, or “palm,” in his hand model of the brain. (You can learn more about this directly from Dr. Siegel on YouTube. Look for Dan Siegel, “Hand Model of the Brain.”)

These are the parts of the brain that store emotional memory, scan for danger, and cause us to immediately fight, freeze, or flee when something potentially life-threatening happens. These parts of our brain are responsible for the survival of our species; they motivate us to save ourselves—at the expense of others if necessary. Without this lifesaving capacity, our ancestors would have been eaten by predators long ago and we wouldn’t be here today. When our self-protective brain perceives a threat, it dumps a cascade of stress-related chemicals into the bloodstream so you can outrun a tiger or lift a boulder off your foot. This part of the brain is not smart, just reactive. It has no logic and no empathy. It’s not interested in being polite.

In the 21st century, we don’t have nearly as many saber-toothed tigers, but our self-protective brains are still fine-tuned for life-threatening danger. Remember, your reptile and limbic brain’s jobs are not discernment. They will respond in less than a millisecond to anything that might match a memory of trauma, embarrassment, disappointment, or pain. So, when your spouse snaps at you, you get a dump of stress hormones that makes you respond as if they were a guy with a machine gun coming at you fast. Your self-protective mechanism doesn’t discern between an embarrassing moment and a life-threatening one. It helps you avoid all perceived threats.



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What Happens When You're Triggered

When you're triggered, you can no longer access the parts of your brain that use logic or, possibly more importantly, empathy. The thinking, connecting, and processing parts of your brain are disconnected in this stressed-out state. It takes quite a bit of time to metabolize all those stress hormones and become able to access logical thought, curiosity, and empathy again. In a relationship context, the pivotal moment is when a discussion turns into a fight. Voices are raised, fingers pointed, and doors slammed; and you see your partner as "them" rather than "us" and go to war. You or your partner are likely to say hurtful things that you will later regret.

Later, if you try to remember exactly what happened during the fight, you're going to remember every bad feeling and every hurtful thing that was said. So will your partner, but the two of you probably won't be able to agree on the sequence of events that led to this situation or exactly what happened. Once that discussion became a fight, your self-protective brain took charge of focusing on every negative feeling or perceived slight, and the logical and connecting parts of your brain couldn't establish a coherent sequence of events and store it in an orderly fashion. This is why it is not productive to go back over an old fight blow by blow.

Time Out!

If you get triggered during an argument with your partner, anything you say or do is likely to damage your relationship. When you're triggered, your options quickly become limited to fight, flee, fawn, faint, or freeze. If you fight, you will say hurtful things you can't take back. If you shut down or leave the scene, your partner will perceive it as abandonment, which may be less dramatic but just as damaging.



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Because you love your partner and don't want to say or do hurtful things or create a messy tangle that is hard to unravel later, you both need to agree on a strategy that reminds you to stop talking, interacting, and causing damage and start self-soothing, dialing back the stress, and getting some calm under your feet.

Here's the strategy: When an interaction starts to heat up, you take a "time out." No last words, no final attempts to "win"—just time out. You can return to the issue later, when you can once again access empathy, logic, and curiosity.

When you call a time-out, it's important to do it in an intentional way. Maybe you *feel* like saying it in a nasty voice and storming out, tossing a rude gesture or insult over your shoulder as you slam the door, but that's probably not the most effective way to leave the discussion. Later on, your partner is going to remember that attempt to end the conflict as cruelty, not kindness.

Of course, it would be better if you could say something like, "I love you, and because I don't want to hurt you by saying something I'll regret later, I'm going to take a time-out and go to the gym. Don't forget I love you, and I'll be back soon." That would be ideal, but most of us can't manage that level of kindness and warmth when we're triggered. The time-out method is designed to help you call a time-out quickly, efficiently, and without causing damage.

The following is a step-by-step walk-through of how to use the time-out method in your next fight.



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Step 1: Plan Ahead

Maybe it sounds silly to plan ahead for a fight, but it's essential that you and your partner talk about your time-out strategy before you're in the middle of a conflict.

1. *Reflect with your partner on your conflict styles.* Think: What do you do when you get triggered? Do you try to escape, convince, stonewall, or attack? Do you get defensive, roll your eyes and cross your arms, get sarcastic, become whiny and overly conciliatory, or just shut down? What kind of damage does that do? Note how your self-protective brain is affecting you and recognize that those are defensive postures designed to save you, not help your partnership. Think about how your partner responds to being triggered, too. When you can identify your partner's go-to conflict style, it can also help you not take it so personally when they go on the attack or shut down. They're just triggered. It's not personal. It's their "downstairs" brain. If you want them to forgive you when you're triggered, it's only fair that you also forgive them. Better yet, call a time-out and have less to apologize for.
2. *Agree on the importance of having a time-out* so you don't continue to hurt one another, and set your intention now to use it the next time a discussion becomes a fight.
3. *Come up with an easy-to-use signal*—something that you can both agree means "I love you, and I'm calling a time-out so we don't hurt one another," but that you can realistically do when you're upset. This could be a hand gesture (preferably not a rude one), a word, a phrase, waving a little white flag you keep on your fridge, or anything else you decide will work.
4. *Pay attention to your reactions.* Prepare yourself to use a time-out effectively by learning more about what happens to you when you get triggered and how you can control your response. Getting triggered is a physiological reaction. Even before your conscious brain quite knows what's happening, your body will react. Next time a minor annoyance interrupts your daily routine, notice if your heart starts to pound or your breathing starts to feel rushed. Learn how your body signals its stress.



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Recognizing your reaction will give you a chance to control how you proceed, like an early-alert system that tips you off before the fight starts—and therefore, gives you a chance to stop, or at least minimize, the damage.

5. *Practice slowing down your response.* It's the nature of a stress reaction to escalate. Your job is to keep that from happening—to get ahead of your own reaction and slow it way down. Otherwise, you won't be able to access the rational voice that tells you to take a time-out. Understanding how your body responds to being triggered will help you master the skill of slowing down and controlling your response. The good news is that everyday life will probably afford you lots of opportunities to practice. Next time you start to feel your stress reaction, pause and take a deep breath. It's not as minor as it sounds: long, slow exhales can actually lower your blood pressure and cortisol levels, shifting you from the threat-response sympathetic nervous system to the calming parasympathetic nervous system. This gives you the chance to slow down and remember your time-out strategy. The more you practice this calming response, the more likely it is that you'll be able to access it when you and your partner fight.

Step 2: Call a Time-Out

Now that you've established your signal, keep it in mind until you and your partner come into conflict or, better yet, when you first start to feel your body reacting in a stressful way. To make this work, you have to be able to identify when you or your partner are starting to get triggered. Watch for these warning signs:

Your voice is rising.

You're convinced there is only one point of view and that your partner is 100% wrong.

Your heart is racing. You feel nauseous. Your face is flushed.



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You're pointing your finger at your partner and saying "You . . ."

You're thinking in overgeneralized terms like, "He *never* supports me" or "She *always* dismisses my ideas."

Pay attention to your reactions so you can notice as soon as your self-protective brain starts to kick in. As soon as you notice that a conversation is starting to turn into a fight, use your time-out signal.

Step 3: Separate and Soothe

Once you've called a time-out, the conversation is put on pause. You can (and should) return to it later, but you need this time to quiet your brain, metabolize the associated stress hormones, and return to the point from which you can hear your partner's point of view without getting defensive. Depending on how upset you were, this might take a few seconds, or a few hours, or a full night's sleep. Here's how to handle your time-out:

1. *Go to separate spaces.* You and your partner need some time apart to return to equilibrium. If you call a time-out but don't take time off, you'll jump right back into the conflict without improving anything. Trust me. Take some time to yourself to calm down.
2. *Figure out your self-care plan.* This will be different for everyone. The important point is that whatever you choose to do during this time should soothe you, not work you up further. For some people, a treadmill or a run is a really good way to get calm. But for other people, exercise will whip them into a frenzy. You could go to a quiet room and write in your journal, but if you spend that time griping about your partner, you're going to keep renewing and fueling the upset. Thoughts create feelings; if you have difficulty controlling your thoughts, you might need to take a break from thinking or talking and do something that is purely physical, and purely pleasant.



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Check out the list at the end of this handout as you consider what will be an effective plan for you. Be mindful of what is likely to work for you and what is likely to be counterproductive. Be prepared to try something and adjust if it doesn't work.

3. *Take at least 45 minutes.* It takes a while for your body to process those stress chemicals. If you took a time-out early, before you got totally triggered, you might be able to get by with just a few deep breaths or a walk around the block, but if you're fully triggered, you might not really be calm and logical until the next morning or even longer. Don't engage in the conversation again until you and your partner are both completely calm, even if that means you have to wait a few days. You will know you are ready to talk again when you can honestly get curious about what your partner was experiencing, why they were upset, or what they were trying to tell you.

Step 4: Reapproach

After you've taken the time to calm down, you can decide when to return to the topic. You shouldn't try to discuss the topic again until you are really ready, but you will need to reapproach and say something connecting or reassuring pretty soon. The person who called the time-out will be in charge of approaching the other. That's because a time-out can feel like abandonment to the other partner; initiating reconnection will help repair any lingering sense of abandonment.

Also, particularly if you have a habit of not returning to conversations about tough topics, it is crucial to establish that a time-out is not an avoidance tactic. If you have a lot of difficulty talking about tough topics, engage a therapist or coach to help you, but don't just sweep it under the rug.

1. *Initiate conversation* with something like, "Okay, that was rough. I want to make sure that we don't just leave this hanging. So let's schedule a time that works for both of us to talk about this again."



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This will reassure the other partner that, even though you called a time-out, you're not simply dropping the topic.

2. *Schedule a time to discuss again.* Often, "right now" is not the best time. Make sure you both have had enough time to calm down completely and try to choose a moment at which you won't have other stressors or distractions to deal with.

Step 5: Revisit the Conversation

How exactly you approach the conversation will depend on your particular circumstances. Take some time to figure out how and when to proceed.

1. *Assess your own state of mind.* Consider: Are you ready to listen with an open mind to what your partner thinks, feels, and prefers? Are you able to express your thoughts and feelings without blame or finger-pointing? Can you get through a conversation without trying to convince your partner to agree with you? Take into account how difficult the material you're trying to discuss is. How triggered did you each get last time?
 - If you both feel ready, by all means sit down and talk.
 - If you're not quite there yet but know you can get there, give it some time. Wait until you're truly calm and feel open, warm, kind, and generous.
 - Start warm. Spend a few minutes connecting, either by quietly holding hands or exchanging positive feedback or things you love and appreciate about one another. This can help you both get completely relaxed, which is a good place to start a conversation from. You can take short, frequent breaks and help one another calm down in this manner whenever you wish. Starting and ending with positivity and sprinkling lots of positive moments into the conversation will help both of you feel less anxious and guarded about talking together.



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- If you are feeling shaky, not sure you can get to a really good place, then go slow, carefully monitor your responses, and be ready to call a time-out again.
2. *Control the conversation.* Here's a great strategy if you're dealing with a particularly triggering topic: Set a timer for 20 minutes, or even less, and stop when the timer goes off. The time limit minimizes the chances that one or both of you will get emotionally exhausted or retriggered. There are a few different ways to handle this technique:
- Some couples like to take turns, splitting that time in half.
 - Some prefer to have one partner use all the time and schedule another time for the second partner to have their say.

Feel free to figure out what works best for you. Remember: You can always come back to the conversation and discuss another aspect later. In fact, with a big topic, you may have to come back to it many times, and you can use this technique whenever you do.

Step 6: Time-Out Again?

During your conversation, if you start to feel things spiraling out of control, do the following:

1. *Focus on getting grounded.* If you start to feel upset, take a few breaths and slow down.
2. *Pause the conversation* and have a feel-good moment together. Hold hands, talk about positive things you appreciate about one another, or go for a little walk together. Remind one another that your love and connection are the entire point of talking things through.
3. *Take a mini time-out.* If you catch it early, you might be able to just take a quick walk around the block, go to the bathroom and splash water on your face, or give yourself some other brief moment of calm.
4. *Take another time-out* if that doesn't help.



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5. *Take as many breaks as you need* to make sure you are only having hard conversations when you have your entire brain onboard. After all, it is the hard conversations you really need your brain for.

Remember, you're not going to get to any kind of resolution if either of you is too triggered.

Time-Out FAQs

Is It Like This Forever?

No. With practice, you will get better at noticing that you are getting upset before you're fully triggered. That will make it easier for you to control your responses to conflict. You might be able to just take a couple minutes, walk around the block, and come right back to it. Or, the two of you might be able to go for a walk and continue the conversation calmly because you're moving your bodies or holding hands. Some couples can take a mini time-out by being silent together but connecting by walking the dog or holding hands. Believe it or not, tossing a ball back and forth between you might make it possible for you to continue to talk.

Eventually, you will be able to take a deep breath and remember that your point of view is just that—a point of view—and that your partner is someone you deeply love and admire, not a wild animal you have to skewer or run from. Wouldn't it be amazing if you could *truly* know and understand your partner's point of view, even if you don't agree with it? When you can get curious and calm, and listen without convincing or blaming, you are ready to talk.



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What If We Can't Do It?

If this technique just isn't working, for any reason, it might be time to bring a couples therapist into the conversation. The time-out strategy is *hard*. It involves working against the natural instincts of a part of your brain that has protected you effectively for years and will continue to protect you, thank goodness. The project is learning to discern *realistic* levels of danger and override the downstairs brain response when things aren't *actually* life-threatening. This is not at all easy; however, getting good at this will be necessary for the success of your relationship. Get whatever help you need to have a hard conversation well. You and your relationship are worth it.

Ideas for Self-Soothing

This is a big list of ways to self-soothe. Some of these may work for you, and others may not. Some will get you out of the house, and some you can just do in the next room while the two of you cool down. Take some time to scan the list and really consider which of these activities seem comforting to you. You could even circle some of the most likely options, and refer back to your notes next time you have a fight. Keep in mind that thoughts create feelings; look for strategies that either stop you from thinking entirely, engage your body in pleasant sensations, or shift your thinking to something positive.

- Take a walk outside.
- Read a beloved novel.
- Soak in a warm bath.
- Write in your journal. (Do not rehash the fight. You're trying to break the thought/feeling spiral, not strengthen it.)



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- Draw or paint.
- Meditate.
- Go for a jog.
- Call a friend and ask them to distract you with something positive or fun. (Do not rehash the fight. You're trying to break the thought/feeling spiral, not strengthen it.)
- Do a yoga routine.
- Go swimming.
- Listen to soothing music.
- Put on an upbeat song and dance.
- Watch cute animal videos online.
- Write a letter or an e-mail to a beloved friend (but don't use this as an opportunity to rehash the fight or complain about your partner).
- Garden.
- Cuddle or play with your pet.
- Watch a movie.
- Go for a bike ride.
- Find a nice nature spot and sit on the grass, watching for wildlife.
- Try out a new recipe.
- Go to the library or your local bookstore and browse the shelves.
- Look through the pictures in a beloved picture book or art book.
- Knit, crochet, or sew.
- Do a jigsaw puzzle, word puzzle, or something else engaging and absorbing but not stressful.
- Color in a coloring book.
- Listen to a podcast.



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CHALLENGING THE THOUGHT/FEELING/MEANING SPIRAL

You are having feelings. That's okay; it happens to everyone from time to time. Thoughts and feelings are intimately intertwined. Thoughts lead to feelings, and when feelings are uncomfortable, we create an entire story about why we are experiencing something uncomfortable. You can think thoughts that make your feelings stronger, bring different feelings, or reduce the intensity of your feelings. This is crucial when you are experiencing painful feelings. Getting some control of your thoughts, so you can experience less suffering, is extremely important to happiness. Making any decisions about actions to take in your relationship is another subject and should be kept separate from managing thoughts and feelings.

Let's consider the topic of jealousy in a polyamorous relationship. Imagine Mary's partner goes on a date with Rosie, and Mary experiences jealousy, along with anger, resentment, fear, or any other uncomfortable emotion. Mary might have such thoughts as, "My partner is probably going to leave me for Rosie," or "Rosie is more attractive than I am," or "Rosie wants to break up my relationship with my partner," or "My partner doesn't care about my feelings." Any of these thoughts reinforce the uncomfortable feelings Mary is experiencing.

Use these steps to identify your feelings, expand your thinking, and calm yourself. Remember, this is not a decision-making process; it is a process of managing the thought/feeling/meaning spiral. Any decision you need to make will be better made at a time when you can think more clearly.

1. What emotions are you experiencing? (Examples include jealousy, fear, anger, resentment, envy, and many more, but it is important to know this worksheet is relevant to any thought/feeling/meaning spiral, not just those having to do with jealousy.)



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2. What thoughts are you thinking that lead to those feelings? Write down the thoughts that strengthen the feelings you are experiencing. (See the aforementioned examples if you are having trouble identifying your thoughts.)
3. Now flip these thoughts or stories upside-down. You might ask yourself, for one thought at a time, “Am I 100% sure this is true?” Next, whatever your answer was to that question, write down a few statements that are opposite your initial thought/story. For instance, if your first thought was, “My partner likes their new lover better than they like me,” some opposite statements would include, “My partner likes me better than their new lover” and “My partner doesn’t like their new lover better than they like me.”
4. Now that you have a list of opposite statements, make a list of the other possible stories you can think of that might explain the current circumstances. For instance, if your partner is late coming home, “They are in a ditch dying” isn’t going to help you function well, feel good, or help in an emergency. It would be helpful to think, “I’m sure they just lost track of time,” or “Maybe they stopped at the store,” or “Their phone might have run out of battery, and that’s why they haven’t called yet.” The truth of the matter is not important right now; what is important is letting your self-protective brain know there are options other than the catastrophic thoughts you have been thinking. For any given situation, think up as many alternative stories as you can. These alternative stories are what I refer to as “meanings,” as in “this is the meaning I make of that.”

Next, take a break from thinking about this. Do your best to take gentle care of yourself. What would feel pleasant right now? What would be a good distraction for you? A hot bath? Making a nice soup? Putting on some peppy music? Doing an art project? Going to the gym? Whatever you choose, make sure it is enjoyable. This might be easier if you give yourself a time-related plan for your mini-vacation, for instance, “I’m not going to worry until 7 a.m.” or “I’m not going to make a decision about my relationship’s future for at least a week.”



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When you are ready, sleep on it. If you have trouble winding down, use a guided meditation to help you relax, listen to a story, or read a pleasant but boring book so you can think about something else.

In the morning, revisit this exercise and decide if there are any questions you have for your partner, assumptions you want to check out, or aspects of your experience you want to share with anyone.

Give yourself some positive strokes for your hard work. You might also ask your partner or a support person for positive strokes. It is a big deal to challenge your own negative thinking, and you are a rock star for doing it.