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RELATIONSHIP ENRICHMENT WORKSHEETS

This handout set is a necessary toolkit for strengthening relational skills. The “Time-Out Exercise” also fits here, so don’t miss it in the “Emotional Balance Worksheets.” This set includes the following:

- **How to Get the Most Out of Relationship Therapy or Coaching**
Contains two exercises I ask all relational therapy clients to do before our first meeting. This handout is an excellent starting place and worth revisiting every now and then.
- **Initiator**
Provides a concise description of the skills involved in the initiator role of the initiator/inquirer process. This handout was generously provided by the Couple’s Institute.
- **Inquirer**
Describes the skills involved in the inquirer role of the initiator/inquirer process. This handout was generously provided by the Couple’s Institute.
- **30 Ideas No Matter How Silly: Brainstorming Process**
For use by couples or individuals, guides a process of expanding options in a playful and effective way. Excellent for any situation where there seems to be a failure of imagination about potential options or actions.
- **Co-Creating a Trusting Relationship**
A guide that fosters an understanding of the relational dynamics that support truth-telling. Building trust is not an individual project; it requires strengthening multiple aspects of the relationship system. If trust has been a problem in your relationship, this handout will help identify where to focus your energy.
- **Making a Good Repair**
A step-by-step guide that explains how to make an effective repair, which is a skill every partner should cultivate. Doing it well saves a lot of time and energy, and is a necessary step in strengthening trust after any large disappointment or broken agreement.



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How to Get the Most out of Relational Coaching

I value your commitment to your relationship, and respect your investment of time, energy, and financial resources. I also take seriously your faith in me as a helper and facilitator for the growth you want in yourself and in your relationship. I very much want your therapy to be extremely successful.

To this end, I have created this handout. I want you to start thinking about your relationship, yourself, and the changes you desire, in ways that will create positive change, even before our first meeting. In fact, I have some homework for you to do before we meet.

Envisioning Your Future Relationship (Exercise 1)

Please take some time to reflect, and then answer these questions:

- What kind of relationship do you want to create? Think about what your relationship might feel like when you are deeply happy in it. Imagine you are coming home at the end of a long day; you are feeling pure joy and anticipation when you park and enter the house. You are very much looking forward to your time with your partner. Now here's the question: what are the features of the relationship you are excited to come home to? What does that relationship look and feel like, from your perspective?
- When you imagine yourself in that amazing, fulfilling relationship, how are you showing up? What kind of a partner are you being, in your fantasy of a deeply happy relationship?
- How far are you from that ideal right now? Be honest: How are you currently showing up that isn't your best self, and how would you like to be showing up, that would be in accordance with your values, and congruent with the relationship that you want to create?

Putting Relational Therapy and the Change Process in Perspective

In my experience, the difference between relationship therapy that is effective, and relationship therapy that is not particularly effective, is whether each partner is able to identify meaningful goals for themselves (not for their partner).

What is a meaningful goal? The goals that move therapy forward most effectively have several key qualities:

1. These goals represent how you want to be as a person. They are in alignment with your values, and feel important to you because they represent steps toward your own personal growth objectives.
2. Achieving these goals will benefit you, not just your partner or your relationship. The best goals have a clear payoff directly to you, the person who holds the goal.

3. These goals will also benefit the relationship, or make a difference to your partner.
4. These goals are quite specific, and actionable. If you can't picture a person in a movie performing the goal activity, it isn't specific enough.

Here is an example of a goal that meets the criteria: I want to listen to my partner without interrupting. This is in alignment with my values because I believe being a good listener is an important quality in a partner, and I aspire to be a good partner. It will also benefit me to listen without interrupting, because then I will get to know my partner, which I would love; I often wonder what they think and feel. I would feel good about myself, and about them, if they told me what they think and feel, even if I didn't agree with everything they say. I also think it will benefit my relationship when I reach this goal, because sometimes my partner tells me they don't feel heard. When I become good at listening, my partner will feel more emotionally safe, and that will definitely benefit our relationship.

Here's another example: I want to stop being defensive when my partner is telling me something. I don't feel good about myself when I'm defensive, so it is in accordance with my values to stop that behavior. It will benefit me directly, when I stop being defensive, because then my partner will be able to speak freely without getting distracted by my perspective; I will get to know them better. And our relationship will benefit because defensiveness often leads to a fight. When I stop being defensive, we will certainly fight less.

Notice that these goals *do not require that you know how to achieve them*. That is where therapy comes in. Your job is to get clear on what you want to change about yourself, and my job is to help you get there.

Setting Meaningful Goals for Personal Change (Exercise 2)

Now it is your turn. Think about what you would like to change about how you show up in your relationship. What might you want to change about yourself, that will make a difference to you, to your relationship, and be in alignment with your values?

Make a list of things you would like to change about yourself. It could be one or two things, or five, or ten. Put a star by the two that you think will make the biggest difference in the quality of your relationship.

Extra credit: for the two changes you think will make the biggest difference, write down how you will feel after you have achieved those changes. What emotions will you experience when you are showing up in the new way you aspire to?

This handout is modified from the work of my mentors, Peter Pearson and Ellyn Bader, who created the Developmental Model of Couple Therapy.



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INITIATOR: REVEALING ONE'S SELF

Focus on One Issue Only

Before you begin, get clear on your main concern. Check your partner's readiness. Stay on track with this one issue. Describe what you want.

Express Your Feelings and Thoughts

Feelings are often complex and can even be contradictory. Are you sad, scared, angry, or happy? Go beyond simply expressing one feeling. Look for the vulnerability that may be underneath your initial feeling, e.g., sadness, fear, jealousy, hurt, guilt, etc.

Remind Yourself

This is my problem. It's an expression of who I am. It's about me revealing myself and being willing to express my own thoughts and feelings.

Avoid Blaming, Accusing, or Name-Calling

Blaming stops you from knowing yourself. You have a role to play in being heard. You may wish to acknowledge some positive aspects of the situation.



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Be Open to Self-Discovery

Explore your personal, inner experience. Keep going deeper into how you feel. What does this tell you about yourself?

How do you respond? How do you think and feel?

Remind Yourself

This process is about my willingness to take a risk to speak or discover my truth and increasing my ability to tolerate the expression of our differences.

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Polyamory Worksheets/Initiator: Revealing One's Self

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INQUIRER: THE EFFECTIVE LISTENER

Listen Calmly

Don't defend yourself, argue, or cross-complain.

Remind yourself that you don't have to take what's said so personally. Hold on to the "big picture."

Ask Questions

Develop an interested and curious state of mind.

The questions you ask are designed to understand your partner's experience.

Can you come up with any examples on your own that will let your partner know you really understand?

Remind Yourself

Am I in a place to listen with openness? I do not own this problem.

I do not need to get upset.

It's up to me to manage my reactions.

Recap

Repeat back to your partner, as accurately and completely as you are able, what you've understood.

Check it out with your partner to see if it's complete and accurate.



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Empathize

Do your best to put yourself in your partner's shoes. Respond with empathy.
Keep making empathetic statements until a soothing moment occurs.
You can hold onto yourself and still imagine what it's like for the other person.

Remind Yourself

My partner is a separate person with their own feelings, thoughts, personality, and family history. I only need to listen, not look for solutions.

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30 IDEAS, NO MATTER HOW SILLY: BRAINSTORMING PROCESS

This process can be used for many situations. Maybe you're trying to come to a decision on a course of action, sort out a household system, find more ways to connect with one another, or think of things you'd enjoy doing on your own while your partner is away. Most things in life would benefit from a brainstorming list. We often allow ourselves to be limited by what we can imagine, because we imagine only what we already assume is possible. This is your opportunity to imagine what is possible from an unlimited, creative, even silly place.

Step 1: Access a sense of vast possibility. The sky's the limit. Encourage yourself to feel playful and creative. You might even get silly, and that's good. This is a creative process; it should feel like fun instead of hard work.

Step 2: Get a piece of paper and get ready to generate a lot of ideas. You might number your page 1–30, because you will be brainstorming your way to at least 30 ideas, if not more.

Step 3: Identify the problem you want to solve and write it in the blank in this heading at the top of the page: "30 Ideas, No Matter How Silly, for _____."

Step 4: Turn off your inner censor and generate ideas as fast as you can. Write down each idea as it comes to mind, even if it seems ridiculous or illogical. Don't stop to consider whether it's practical, affordable, or in compliance with how you think the world works. If you are on a team of idea-generators, so much the better, but you can also do this alone. If you have partners, take turns generating ideas. No cross-talk; don't shoot down one another's ideas or even your own. Instead, use every idea as a jumping-off place for even better—or even more silly—ideas. No idea is too ridiculous.



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This is a creative expansion exercise, not a list for narrowing your focus or settling on a decision. Your goal is to get past what you thought was or wasn't possible with your previous limited thinking.

Step 5: Go through your list and do some refining. Everything on the list was important for idea-generating, but some items may not need to stay on the list. For each idea you cross off, make sure there are still several other ideas on the list that address the kernel of what was attractive about that one.

- Remove any items that are not in accordance with your values, but think about what they point to that is missing in your current life. For instance, if you wrote, “Go to bed and never get up again,” you might add, “Take more naps, learn stress-reduction strategies, take a meditation class, take a day off in the next week.”
- Remove anything that is totally unrealistic, but again, make sure you address what it points to that you might benefit from adding to your life. For instance, if you wrote, “Join a circus,” but given your age or circumstances you know for sure you won't be doing that, think about the feeling it generates and add items to your list that might address that feeling. Ideas might include taking a dance class, wearing playful clothing, learning to juggle, or seeking out opportunities to perform. Have respect for your desires.

Step 6: Now that you have a list, you can post it somewhere prominent. Is it a list of fun things you could do together? Put it on the fridge. Is it a list of fun things you could do alone? Post it by your bedside or on your mirror. Is it a list of ways you might handle a household dilemma? Put it in your Household Matters Monthly Meeting Notes book.



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Step 7: If you made your brainstorming list as a step toward decision-making, the next step is to use it to come up with a first experiment. Remember not to get too serious about it; just pick something that feels like a good starting place for everyone involved and give it a try for a limited amount of time. Schedule a date to revisit and evaluate the experiment.



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CO-CREATING A TRUSTING RELATIONSHIP

Honesty is at the root of trust. I don't think it is possible to create a trusting connection without a substantial foundation of honesty; however, honesty is a more complicated topic than you might think. For one thing, no one is honest all the time, even in thriving relationships. For another, while being an honest person may be part of a personal values system, honesty is also a team sport.

There are multiple kinds of lies, and they are not all created equal. In this document, I describe a variety of common types of lies and when they tend to crop up; for each type, I share some action steps you can use to strengthen your truth-telling skills. The taxonomy of lies I share was developed by Peter Pearson and Ellyn Bader of the Couple's Institute, and you can learn more about it in their book *Tell Me No Lies*.

Some lies are kindhearted attempts to soothe or lift someone's spirits—for instance, "You look great in those pants." These *loving lies* are very common in relationships; they aren't malicious and they rarely do any real damage.

Action steps:

- Any time you are thinking of telling a loving lie, consider whether that well-intentioned untruth will strengthen your intimate connection or damage it. Ask yourself if your partner would agree with you.
- Initiate a conversation with your partner about this. One person's loving lie will be another person's trust-breaker, so get clear with one another about the topics and situations for which you each prefer total honesty.



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Another type of lie is a *conflict-avoidant lie*. Every small child learns how to craft or spin a story to avoid getting in trouble and then hones that skill throughout the span of many years. No one is immune, so you can let go of the idea that lying makes you, or your partner, a bad person; however, lies that are intended to avoid a negative consequence can easily undermine trust.

Action steps:

- Take a good look at how you handle conflict. When you and your partner disagree, do you feel comfortable speaking up? If not, why not? What are you afraid will happen? Be honest with yourself, and identify if you have a tendency to avoid conflict by telling lies, hiding the truth, or avoiding tough conversations.
- Initiate a conversation with your partner about managing disagreements between the two of you. Do you both agree it would be good to be able to disagree without creating a lot of drama or tension? Do you need some help with this? If so, agree to find a coach or therapist to help you.
- Start growing your muscle for truth-telling. Some people think that if they are going to be honest, they will have to give up a lot of things they don't want to give up. In truth, all you have to give up is lying. Instead of lying, tell your partner what you think, feel, believe, or prefer. Let the disagreement happen, and prove to yourself and one another that having a difference of opinion won't kill you.
- For some, disagreeing and staying connected is hard. If you and your partner are unable to do it despite your best efforts, get some help from a therapist or coach. This is a learnable skill. It will make you happier and your relationship stronger.



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Learning to *invite truth-telling* is just as important as learning to tell the truth. Just as many of us have learned to lie from childhood onward, many of us have learned to discourage truth-telling in our interactions. When we respond badly to something we're not comfortable hearing, we make it harder for people to come to us with uncomfortable truths in the future.

Action steps:

- Take a good look at how you respond when someone tells you something you don't want to hear. Do you cry, yell, run away, shut down, or leave the house in a huff? Have you ever heard yourself say, "Don't ever talk to me about that again!"? If any of this describes you on a bad day, you could get better at inviting your partner to be honest with you.
- Trust yourself. You can handle some hard stuff. You'll be okay. Learn to trust that you will live through getting bad news, learning something uncomfortable about your partner, and considering new ideas. Develop some grit.
- Identify your goals. How will it benefit you to hear more honest truth from your partner? Certainly you will then know them better and be better able to figure out if you like them. Are there other benefits? You are learning to get some control of your emotional reactions so your partner can more easily talk honestly to you; it will help if you keep your reasons for doing so at the front of your mind, because it won't always feel comfortable. Know why you're doing it.

Learning to co-create a comfortable environment for discussing, potentially disagreeing about, and certainly disclosing uncomfortable truths is the best thing you can do to strengthen trust in your relationship. Partners must work together to do this.



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The following are some discussion points to get you started in creating a relationship based on trust. As you discuss these items, ask one another questions until you can accurately say back what your partner is expressing, but using your own words.

- How important is honesty to you and why?
- How comfortable are you telling untruths? What types of things have you lied about (for instance, in previous relationships or your childhood)? What types of things have motivated you to lie?
- Give your partner examples of the kinds of things that feel important to you to know and the kinds of things that don't feel important to you to know. Maybe there are even some things you don't want to know. Discuss this with enough examples that you both feel confident that you understand one another's preferences, which might be very different from one another. Do not assume your partner wants to know (and not know) the same types of things you do. Ask. Tell. Be specific.
- What do you do to actively create an environment of trust and honesty in your relationship? What does your partner do?
- What do you do to create a soft landing-place for your partner to make difficult, honest, and vulnerable disclosures? Check with them to see if your efforts are helpful to them or find out what strategies might work better for them.
- When you have a choice to make that you know will affect your partner, and you suspect you and your partner will disagree about what you should choose, what feelings do you experience, and what is your thought process? Discuss how you want to show compassion for one another in situations like this.



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- When you make a mistake that affects your partner, or when your partner feels hurt by something you have done, what emotions do you experience? How do you handle those emotions? How would you like to handle them? Discuss how you each would like to show compassion for one another in situations like this.



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MAKING A GOOD REPAIR

There are many situations in which a repair is needed. Maybe you said something you regret, told a lie, or caused harm in some way. Maybe you made a choice your partner didn't agree with or did something your partner feels is a betrayal. Perhaps there is something in your shared past that keeps coming up again and again. Learning to make an effective repair can help in any of these situations, but a good repair goes far beyond "I'm sorry." This document will guide you through the process of making a good repair. I direct this handout to the person who is initiating a repair for something they did that was hurtful to their partner, but the steps for getting ready are just as applicable to the other partner. A repair takes grit, grace, and stamina for everyone concerned. Don't rush it, and take breaks if you need to.

Action steps for getting ready to repair:

- Get grounded. How will you benefit from a good repair? It will take some time and energy, so get clear on why you think it is important and what you will get out of it.
- Trust yourself. You're strong enough to admit your mistakes and live through it.
- Forgive yourself, but don't let yourself off the hook. Everyone makes mistakes. And all actions have consequences. You are a fabulous human being—and even more so when you take responsibility for your actions, make a good repair, and build a safe and trusting connection that gets stronger throughout time.
- Prepare for some discomfort. It is not reasonable to expect trust to grow if you don't have the grit to really hear your partner's point of view. For many people, that is very difficult, particularly if you caused discomfort or harm. Some people prepare for discomfort by bracing themselves, but I think it is more effective to get in touch with your highest and best intention, your very best self, and do whatever it takes to stay in touch with that part of you.



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- While you are in touch with your best self, it should be easy to find generosity in your heart. You will need it for this process to work. If you are not feeling loving and generous, get a therapist, coach, or friend to help you get there first. Making a pseudo-repair from a resentful or cranky place will not build trust or any meaningful connection.
- Get comfortable. The best repair takes some time and focus, and that focus should initially be on the injured party or the most distressed person. Prepare to focus on your partner without explaining your perspective for quite some time.

Action steps for making the repair:

- Get curious about what your partner's experience was. What hurt? What was hard? How did your partner perceive events? What interpretation did they put on those events? Make sure you stay with this process until you are very clear and able to say back what went wrong from your partner's perspective. How would they prefer for you to have handled the situation and why? You need to know it all, and ending this process too soon won't benefit you, difficult as it may be. Stay with it and show genuine curiosity until you have a feeling of, "Oh! I get it!" Then make sure you can say it back and your partner agrees that you got it.
- Express empathy. Once you understand what happened from your partner's point of view, you can express empathy. That means indicating that you understand how they felt and it makes sense to you. When it goes well, this is what it sounds like: "I now understand that when I did (x), this is what happened for you (description of your partner's internal experience). I see how you felt (x), and it makes total sense to me that you would feel that way, given the combination of what I did and what it meant to you."
- Apologize. Explain to your partner why you are sorry. Continue to focus on your partner, and resist the impulse to explain your perspective. It will be much better if you save your point of view for later.



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- Explain what you plan to do differently in the future (if anything). This should go beyond, “It was a mistake, and it won’t happen again.” Your new understanding of the situation will inform your future choices; however, think this through carefully because you *must not* agree to something you can’t or don’t want to follow through on. The following are some ideas:
 - What exactly would you do differently if you had it to do over again? Think about the choices you made and the choice points as the situation evolved.
 - Would you want to think about things differently, take responsibility, check in more, and/or communicate more fully?
 - Maybe there is a way you would like to prevent this situation from occurring again. This should go beyond, “This situation is not likely to recur so let’s move on.” If a similar situation did happen, how would you want it to go?
 - Are there emotions you would like to deal with differently, to prevent a similar situation from coming up again? Sometimes such emotions as boredom, anxiety, anger, dissatisfaction, or depression can be involved in choices we later regret.
- Acknowledge that your partner might have some doubts about your ability to follow through effectively with your plan. This is particularly important if there have been major or recurring breaches of trust in the past. For instance, this might be an acknowledgement that years have gone by with many lies and that it would be a lot to expect a partner to suddenly trust in change just because of one heartfelt conversation. While certainly difficult, this level of repair is respectful of the reality of particularly difficult situations. It is extremely challenging to stick with someone while they do battle with their inner conflict-avoidant demons or tendency toward abundant untruths. Acknowledging that you are asking something big from your partner in the way of newfound trust is a very respectful thing to do. (Thank you to Pete Pearson from the Couples Institute for this concept.)