

Repacking Our Baggage

Community Strength Starts With Healthy Relationships

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*This publication was financially assisted by the California Emergency
Management Agency (CalEMA).*

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Getting Started

We *can* build happier, healthier relationships—that is the premise of the handbook you are holding. The second premise is that healthy relationships (with intimate partners as well as family and friends and co-workers) transform our lives for the better, and form the foundation of strong, creative, connected, and self-determining communities.

Healthy relationships look a whole bunch of different ways. Individuals are different from each other and so are relationships. The goal of this handbook is not to squash out the practices that make our relationships unique, or to make a big deal out of differences that we have already accepted; it is simply to give us some practical ideas to think about and try out in real life, and to help us learn about ourselves and our “baggage” so that we can better understand and guide our interactions and relationships with others. We acknowledge that there is no single cookie-cutter healthy relationship model to which everyone should aspire, but believe that with honest self-reflection, skills building, committed practice and an open spirit of adventure, we can each make changes in our relationships that help tame the bad flare-ups and make the good stuff last.

Where we’re coming from...

This handbook is a guide for all of us. The materials in it are used by Asian Women’s Shelter as part of our work to promote healthy relationships and work against violence in all communities. Included are handouts and exercises geared toward resolution of and recovery from negative cycles, and exercises geared toward creating and reinforcing positive cycles within relationships. We hope that it will provide some food for thought and food for action. It says that the movement for healthy relationships is on (!) and that it is inextricably linked to movements for social justice, non-violence and peace.

We use these materials in a community-based initiative called *Chai Chats: Practical Conversations On Healthy Relationships and Communities*, through which we share tips, tools, reflections, and conversations on how to create and maintain relationships that are mutually satisfying and based in equity, respect, and fun. *Chai Chats* is a program devoted to supporting Asian Pacific Islander lesbian, bisexual, queer women’s and transgender communities. It provides a needed and rare space in which we can talk more freely about our relationships and ourselves, unencumbered by the need to protect our queer relationships or our immigrant families or Asian backgrounds (from outside attack or misinterpretation) by staying silent about the problems we face in them.

In our experience, there are few tools or models in our grassroots communities or anti-violence and social service networks to help people proactively develop healthy relationship skills and identify and unlearn their uses of violence. We hope that these materials fill some of that void, and help us generate sustaining practices in our relationships, families, workplaces, and communities.

Why? We know the potential that healthy relationships can bring to our families, communities, and world. But the learning of skills to build and maintain healthy relationships is not prioritized in our society. Examples of healthy relationships can seem hard to come by. We know statistically (and experientially) that women suffer more physical, psychological, and sexual attack from current and former partners than they do elsewhere. We look around and see jealousy renamed as love, and aggression renamed as protectiveness. We see examples of chronic conflict and escalating fighting. We see the effects of oppression, insecurity, privilege, narcissism, and raging self-protectiveness play out in relationships. We see people use their power and privilege and/or their own vulnerabilities and experiences of oppression to hold down and control others. We see people get addicted to the thrill of relationship beginnings and seek it as soon as they feel it fading or expect it to. We support our friends during break-ups that go bad (sometimes *really* bad). We see ourselves and others we care about go through the same harmful patterns over and over again and don't know what to do about it. And we struggle as our communities split apart in the pain and confusion that embodies situations of relationship violence.

But all the while, we cultivate our own image of how we wish our relationships could or should look. We wonder what is too much to hope for or expect. We wonder when to give up, what to give up on, what to keep working toward. We struggle with how to love someone else when we are not at our best. We wonder how we can love someone as much as we do and then treat them badly when we're stressed out or triggered. We wonder how someone can do the same to us. We try to uphold our relationships amidst the struggles and stressors of everyday life: money, sex, physical and mental illness, jobs, children and pets, family, responsibilities, addictions, change and transitions, grief and loss. We struggle with our partners and loved ones over small differences, large differences, broken assurances, and opposite personalities. And we try to adapt to the crushing pressure and pain that comes from family and community rejection of our relationships because they are queer (LGBTQ), and/or because they are with someone of a certain class, religion, race, nation, or other "unpopular" background.

How could we expect each other to navigate all of this without some support? We need tips and tools to create the kinds of relationships that bring safety, joy, acceptance, companionship, and growth to our lives. We need support to understand ourselves so that we can understand the dynamics that emerge when we are in close relationship to others.

We call this “repacking our baggage.” By baggage, we refer to our in-born personality tendencies and temperaments, our experiences as children and youth, our adult experiences, our coping strategies, the responses and patterns we have developed in our families of origin, the responses we have developed as a result of oppression and trauma, and our behavioral patterns for dealing with stress or insecurity.

We want to support efforts to re-learn about ourselves, re-understand our personalities and experiences, and refine our relationship habits and patterns. *Then* we can create relationships on firmer ground, decide if or when it’s appropriate to leave relationships and do so in ways that are informed, respectful, and safe, and steer our relationships in new directions. By giving our selves and our relationship some attention and care, we can see and experience how healthy relationships can improve so many aspects of life: paying the bills, getting or keeping a job or apartment, making or keeping friends, being parents or caretakers, handling challenges or disappointments, celebrating accomplishments, dealing with oppression and discrimination, creating space for relief, respite and joy, and working toward our goals and dreams.

We know from our work at Asian Women’s Shelter that people have an amazing capacity to face reality with honesty and courage. We know that people can look at themselves, understand their dynamics with others, and figure out how to move forward in more positive ways. Join us on this journey. We are so excited to share it with you.

Languages of Love: Communication That Counts

When you want to express love and caring for someone, what do you do?
What kinds of actions from others make you feel valued and seen, loved and appreciated?

There are endless ways that we can express love and caring for people. Below are five categories that represent a broad range of common expressions of love. We'll be using these five for this exercise.

1. **Words of Affirmation**
Compliments, praise, verbal celebration/recognition, communication that reinforces strengths, etc.
2. **Physical Affection**
Casual touch, hugs, holding hands, linking arms, kisses, sex, massage, etc.
3. **Quality Time**
Focused time, attention, and/or shared activity
4. **Acts of Service**
Practical and/or logistical support and care-giving; could involve helping with work responsibilities, transportation, meals, errands, etc.
5. **Gifts**
Purchased or created expressions of love and caring; could be expensive or cheap or free, could be notes and cards or special food treats or more formal presents.

Of course many of us enjoy and thrive on all expressions of love and appreciation from those we care about. But more often than not, we each speak our own primary (and possibly secondary) "language of love" which is to say that we tend to do certain actions to convey our love for someone. And more often than not, we each understand a primary (and possibly secondary) language of love, which is to say that we recognize and experience certain actions as "love" more than others.

We hope and sometimes assume that when we do or say something that expresses love to someone, they understand and experience it in the way that we intend it. But that isn't always the case. Sometimes someone feels loved when they get quality time, and your acts of service are not at all experienced as the love that you intend them to convey. Someone else might primarily feel love through physical affection from their partner, and over time get frustrated because their partner's main language of love is to give words of affirmation and gifts. In the beginning of relationships, we often thrive off of absolutely every kind and loving gesture that we receive from the other person. But over time, if the person doesn't naturally show love in the way that "clicks" with us (even if they show it through other ways that we used to enjoy or still do to a lesser extent) we can run into confusion and dissatisfaction.

Uma and Dani had lived together for three years. Uma's clear language of love was "giving gifts." She loved to get Dani little treats and surprises. Dani found them sweet but kind of useless, and ultimately wanted words of affirmation more than anything from Uma.

Dani's very clear language of love was "acts of service." Dani expressed caring and love for Uma by driving out of her way to pick Uma up, greeting her when she returned from out of town with steaming hot take-out food, and helping Uma through logistical challenges. Uma thought Dani's actions were generous but unrelated to love. Physical affection and quality time from Dani would have conveyed to Uma that love was still alive in their relationship.

From their individual perspectives, both Uma and Dani were giving love to the other that wasn't being appreciated, and they both felt that their relationship was worsening in a way they couldn't name. Uma and Dani used the "5 Languages of Love" to understand and shift their dynamic, and have a little fun with it. Dani practiced giving more physical affection and quality time, and tried harder to intentionally appreciate Uma's treats as acts of love from Uma. And Uma practiced giving more words of affirmation, and translating Dani's acts of service into "Dani is loving me right now."

It can be fun and helpful to recognize these trends in ourselves and others! We can learn about each other's "languages of love" and make fun and practical adjustments in what we do, and how we recognize each other's efforts.

What follows is like a personal quiz you might find in a grocery store check-out aisle (it's a quiz activity¹ like you might find in Cosmopolitan magazine...). It is focused on understanding the expressions of love on which you thrive. It's not scientific: it won't result in a full instruction manual that you can give to your partner, family member or friend. But it can be fun to do and talk about, and maybe a bit enlightening...

Think of someone you care about and your relationship with them. If you don't want to think of an intimate partner or ex-partner, think of a close family member or friend. Do the quiz as quickly as you can, avoiding "analysis paralysis" or over-complicating the task. The quiz consists of several pairs of statements. Read both statements in each pair. Given a choice between the two, which matches you better? Circle the letter after the statement that matches you better, then move on to the next pair of statements. (For example: Between A and B (not between A, B, and all of the others on the page), which matches your personality better? Which feels more like love to you?) None of the five languages of love are better or worse than the others. Follow your gut reactions.

After circling one letter per pair of statements, total the number of letters according to the instructions at the end of the quiz.

If you do the quiz once thinking about your friend and once thinking about your partner, you might get different results. We can use different primary languages of love with different people. It can be fun to compare them!

¹ Adapted from the work of Gary Chapman

5 Love Languages Quiz

For each pair of statements, circle the letter after the statement that is “more true” or that best represents you.

1.	I like to receive sweet and encouraging notes or texts from you. I like it when you hug me.	W P
2.	I like to spend one-on-one time with you. I feel loved when you help me out with day-to-day to-do's.	Q A
3.	I feel loved and appreciated when you give me little gifts. I like taking long walks together with you.	G Q
4.	I feel loved when you do things to help me out. I feel loved when you touch me.	A P
5.	I feel loved when you hold me in your arms. I feel loved when I receive a present from you.	P G
6.	I like to go places with you. I like to hold hands with you.	Q P
7.	I feel loved and secure when you praise and affirm me. Gifts and treats from you make me feel connected to you.	W G
8.	I like to sit close to you. I like for you to tell me I look good.	P W
9.	I like to spend special time just with you. I like to receive little treats from you after being separated.	Q G
10.	I know you love me when you help me get something done. I know you love me when you tell me you accept and admire me.	A W
11.	I relish significant time spent together. I relish the kind words you say to me.	Q W
12.	I feel whole when we hold each other. What you do affects me more than what you say.	P A
13.	I feel closer to you when we have sex often. I feel closer when we get to really talk or spend time together.	P Q
14.	I feel your love when you compliment my achievements. I feel your love when you go out of your way to do me a favor.	W A
15.	I like for you to touch me (however briefly) when you walk by me. I value your praise and try to avoid your criticism.	P W

- | | | |
|-----|---|--------|
| 16. | I feel special and valued when I receive little meaningful gifts from you.
I feel loved when you help me with my home projects. | G
A |
| 17. | I feel loved when you compliment my appearance.
I feel loved when you take the time to understand my feelings. | W
Q |
| 18. | Your physical touch makes me feel loved and cared for.
Your acts of service make me feel loved and cared for. | P
A |
| 19. | I appreciate the practical favors you do to help me through the day.
I appreciate the cards and gifts you make for me. | A
G |
| 20. | I love the feeling I get when you give me your undivided attention.
I love the feeling I get when you help run errands that I don't have time for. | Q
A |
| 21. | I feel loved when you celebrate my birthday with a gift you know I want or need.
I feel loved when you celebrate my birthday with meaningful words (written or spoken). | G
W |
| 22. | I feel loved when you help me out with chores that are overwhelming me.
I feel loved when you get me a treat after I've had a hard day. | A
G |
| 23. | I appreciate it when you remember special days with a surprise gift.
I appreciate it when we remember special days with a trip or activity together. | G
Q |
| 24. | I appreciate it when you give time and listen patiently to me.
I appreciate it when you step in to help me get something done when I am worn down. | Q
A |
| 25. | I am excited when you kiss me unexpectedly.
I am excited when you give me a gift for no special occasion. | P
G |
| 26. | I like to be told that you appreciate me.
I like for you to look at me when we are talking together. | W
Q |
| 27. | Treats and gifts from you are always meaningful to me.
Your warmth and physical touch make me feel better. | G
P |
| 28. | I feel loved when you say how much you appreciate and see me.
I feel loved when you try to make my day simpler and easier. | W
A |
| 29. | Several inexpensive treats can mean as much or more than one expensive gift. I feel close and happy when I get them.
I feel close and happy when we go away somewhere, just the two of us. | G
Q |
| 30. | I feel connected when you touch or kiss me daily.
I feel connected when you praise or encourage me daily. | P
W |

Tally up your totals for each letter: How many A's are circled? How many G's? (etc.)

A (acts of service):

G (gifts):

P (physical affection):

Q (quality time):

W (words of affirmation):

How do your responses fall across all five languages of love? Which did you prefer the most number of times? Which did you almost never choose as an expression of love?

Do the top 1 or 2 represent languages of love you understand best (a.k.a. actions that you "hear" as love)? Did the results match what you intuitively thought of yourself?

What languages of love do you think you tend to speak (a.k.a what do you do to convey love) to a partner (or family member or friend)?

Can you think of examples of when languages of love matched up well between partners (family members or friends) and when they didn't?

Can you think of two ways to use this information to strengthen a current relationship of yours?

1.

2.

What's my temperament? What's yours?

Understanding our own temperaments and the temperaments of those close to us helps us create and sustain healthy relationships. Temperament differences play out in all kinds of ways, in all kinds of relationships. And in the context of intimate relationships, many of us find ourselves with people who have temperaments that are different from our own. For example, we see couples in which one person is very emotionally expressive while the other is emotionally reserved, or in which one person is very active while the other person is more calm and still, or in which one person loves jumping into new adventures and experiences while the other is more cautious and risk-averse. We see one partner feel “done” and want to leave the party just as the other is starting to enjoy the music and the crowd. We see couples in which one partner loves sleeping at 10PM and waking at 7AM bright eyed and ready to jog, while the other would naturally sleep by midnight and waking at 8 or 9, and who is painfully sensitive to sound and light for the first half hour of the day. While it's possible to enjoy, overlook, or avoid personality differences and have a great time with someone for a while, over time these mismatches can become harder to sort out.

Our personalities are complex. We are born with some aspects of our personalities, some emerge from our responses to environmental factors or experiences in our lives, and we can develop ways of ignoring, suppressing, or amplifying our expression of our in-born personalities depending on how they are received by our families and social environments.

Numerous studies have been done in an effort to understand which aspects of our personalities are deeply rooted in our inherent selves (i.e. “unique personality I was born with that won't change much”) and which aspects shift significantly over time in response to external context or experience. There is some consensus these days that most factors of our core personalities are genetic and in-born, but how we express them (or not) varies tremendously depending on our life experience.

Temperament refers to an in-born dimension of personality that impacts how we perceive the world and our own first “natural” responses to those perceptions. It refers to our physical and emotional responses, *NOT* to how we express or externalize them. Our temperament plays a role in how we respond to common experiences of everyday life—and to how we interpret and react to others' responses that are different from our own. Whether we accept temperament as mostly in-born or not, understanding it can help us manage (or even steer clear of) certain common conflicts that can become recurring low grade frustrations or long-lasting and potentially impassable relationship roadblocks.

The elements of temperament we explore here are:

1. Persistence
2. Sensitivity
3. Adaptability
4. Intensity
5. Regularity
6. Activity Level
7. First Reaction

They are elements of personality that impact our individual approaches to everyday life: to family, friends, fun, work/career, parenting, relaxation, stress, errands and responsibilities, accomplishments, celebration, unexpected changes, etc. When we understand temperament we understand our own experience better, improve our ability to predict some of our potential triggers, and expand our acceptance of what is “normal” in our selves and others.

Unfortunately, in a lot of relationships differences in temperament are not accepted as equal. And especially in unequal relationships be they between parent and child, boss and employee, or in an intimate partnership where one person is always treated as less than the other, temperament differences can be completely disregarded or disallowed. The person in power tends to think of their way as “right” and the way of the other person as wrong, pathological, irritating, or irrelevant, and expect them to change or conform. In this kind of environment, connection becomes increasingly challenging, and conflict or contempt becomes ever-present, be it at the surface or just below.

Conflict over temperament differences can be compounded when certain temperaments are culturally valued and others devalued (at best) or openly ridiculed or punished (at worst). Different cultures (family cultures, media, dominant cultural practices within ethnic groups, work cultures, gendered aspects of culture, etc.) support or normalize different traits. For example, a culture might define high persistence as a valuable and respected trait in general or for men, and consider it stubborn when exhibited by women. Or high sensitivity (to taste, sound, sight, etc.) might be valued in one culture or cultural context and considered finicky or weak in another.

A different way is possible! We can learn about temperament and develop more compassion for each other. When two people recognize their temperament differences and accept them as equal (rather than one being better or more normal than the other) we are more likely to negotiate an arrangement that works.

Try approaching temperament by assuming no inherent good or bad value attached to any of its elements. Each temperament trait can offer strengths and challenges depending on the situation. Below is a review of each of the classic elements of temperament followed by a 1-5 spectrum on which you can place yourself. Read through them and circle where you think you fall on the spectrum for each element! Try not to think about what you “should be,” or how you “should respond,” or how you wish you were. Try to just circle what you think best corresponds to your own natural responses, without attaching moral value to them. You may find it interesting to examine how temperament differences were handled in your family of origin, and how your reaction to that plays out in your intimate relationships...

I. Persistence

When you are involved in a task, how do you feel about being interrupted? If someone tells you “no,” does it make you want to push harder? When you have to stop before the task is “done,” how do you feel?

Low Persistence

1

2

3

4

5

High Persistence

Possible Traits of Someone Who is Low Persistence: Easy to stop or let go, doesn't mind interruption, but can have a hard time following through or completing things, or can have a hard time holding the line about things.

Possible Traits of Someone Who is High Persistence: Hard time stopping, really wants to finish, committed to goals, able to give full attention, good at holding the line (willing to “fight” to be able to keep trying or finish), but can respond to interruptions with irritation, may miss other's cues, has a hard time being flexible, and has a hard time feeling they've done a good job if nothing is fully completed.

2. Sensitivity

How aware are you of sights, sounds, smells, textures or tastes? Do noises irritate you? Do you notice subtle changes in lighting or temperature? Do you get overwhelmed when there is too much to look at? Do you have a hard time with textural differences (i.e. of your clothes, sheets, food, etc.)? Note: We can be *really* sensitive about some things (i.e. sound) and less sensitive about others (i.e. sights).

Low Sensitivity

High Sensitivity

1

2

3

4

5

Possible Low Sensitivity Traits: Not easily irritated or overwhelmed by sensory stimuli; can enjoy amusement parks, crowds, Home Depot; can wear clothes of any texture; rarely notices small changes in temperature; easy to stay calm and focused; often have trouble believing or being patient with what it's like for people with high sensitivity; can overload sensitive people.

Possible High Sensitivity Traits: Easily irritated or overwhelmed by sensory stimuli including crowded stores, crying children, loud bars or parties, clutter, highly decorated classrooms (visual stimuli); particular about how clothing feels; finds it very hard or impossible to focus on other things in the midst of sensory stimuli; probably often told "too sensitive" or picky which may result in frustration with self and attempts to "tough it out" until really overwhelmed; usually needs awareness and practice to recognize when to take a break *before* overwhelm; Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) kids often (some say always) have high sensitivity. Stress pushes everyone toward this end of the spectrum.

3. Adaptability

How easily do you shift from one activity or idea to another? How do you feel about surprises or sudden changes in your schedule or plan?

Low Adaptability

High Adaptability

1

2

3

4

5

Possible Traits of Low Adaptability: Organized; predictable; has an easy / comfortable time establishing routines; fights against feeling rushed or surprised; unlikely to overlook transitions; may judge adaptable people as unpredictable or unreliable.

Possible Traits of High Adaptability: Flexible, good for in-the-moment problem-solving, may not even perceive some transitions, may be triggered by those who need longer transition time, may judge those who need or thrive on a schedule as controlling, may have trouble with follow-through or be experienced as highly distractible.

4. Intensity

How strong are your emotional reactions (what you feel, not necessarily what you do about it or how much you show it)?

Low Intensity

High Intensity

1

2

3

4

5

Possible Traits of Low Intensity (milder emotion): Not emotive, may be described by other people as especially calm, not easily triggered by others' feelings or intensity, not easily frustrated, may have a hard time empathizing with higher intensity emotions, may judge those who show more emotion in any variety of ways.

Possible Traits of High Intensity (more intense emotion): Experiences emotions deeply, passionately, with zest; has a hard time "letting go" of emotions (may have experienced others trying to convince to "let it go and move on;") has to work harder not to get triggered by others; can experience and judge low intensity people as "emotionally flat" or "Spock-like."

5. Regularity

Do you like/need to sleep or eat at regular times? Do you get thrown off (i.e. irritated, upset, stressed) when your regular day-to-day schedule changes?

Low Regularity

High Regularity

1

2

3

4

5

Possible Traits of Low Regularity (flexible): Irregularity is okay, can wait to eat or sleep; has an easier time traveling or adjusting to others' schedules (i.e. if friends or family are visiting, if someone is ill, etc.).

Possible Traits of High Regularity: Routines give a sense of security and reliability; bodily functions are more regular/on-schedule; feels a range of stress/anxiety/irritation if schedule is disrupted; can physically feel quite bad if sleep schedule or meal schedule changes; with entitlement can expect others to adapt to their schedule regardless of others' temperament.

Each can have a very hard time understanding and being patient with the other.

6. Activity Level

How active are you? This is not just about exercising or working out. What amount of activity makes you feel good? When you want to “unwind,” “take it easy,” or “relax,” do you want to go for a jog, or lie down and watch a movie? What level of activity at work or home makes you feel invigorated? What level of activity makes you feel exhausted or overwhelmed?

Low Activity Level

High Activity Level

1

2

3

4

5

Possible Traits of Low Activity: Easy to sit still for long periods of time; might need or crave quiet still time; can take or leave physical exercise; likes to stroll rather than walk briskly; generally laid back; a rejuvenating vacation involves free time and lounging; enjoys single activities but not three scheduled in a row; finds high activity people (and their activities) exhausting.

Possible Traits of High Activity: Fidgety, needs regular exercise; prefers to walk briskly; not easily overwhelmed by lack of “down time;” likes to pack the schedule with things to do; feels antsy and stir crazy when stuck in the house too long; a rejuvenating vacation involves many activities; can have a hard time stopping, focusing, or being still; finds low activity people boring or judges them as lazy.

7. First Response (Approach or Withdrawal)

What is your characteristic first response to a new idea, place, thing, or activity? Does it feel natural to wait and observe before jumping in, or does it feel easy and natural to throw yourself into the new experience?

Low (Cautious) First Response

1

2

3

High (Jump-In) First Response

4

5

Possible Traits of Low (Cautious) First Response: Needs time to decide; watches before joining; less able to focus for a longer period of time when in a new environment; can judge high first response people to be careless, reckless, anxiety-producing, or exhausting.

Possible Traits of High (Jump-In) First Response: Quick to decide likes and dislikes; jumps at any chance for something new; joins in quickly; no noticeable (or at least negative) physiological reaction to newness; may move too quickly for their cautious counterparts or judge them as overly cautious or constrained by fear.

**How does temperament play out in our relationships?
How do we make it work?**

Think of someone you are in an intimate relationship with, or someone that you spend a lot of time with, and circle where you think they fall on a 1-5 spectrum for these elements of temperament, with 1 being “very low” and 5 being “very high.” (If possible, get them to rank themselves!) Compare the two. What do you notice? Where are the similarities and differences? How do you two handle your temperament differences?

	ME					(NAME): _____				
Persistence	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Sensitivity	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Adaptability	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Intensity	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Regularity	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Activity Level	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1 st Response	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5

Is there one aspect of the person’s temperament that is hard for you, or that makes you easily irritated or judgmental? Is there an aspect of your temperament that you feel the other person does not accept or expects you to change? (It could be a constant conflict or one that flares up every once in a while under certain conditions). Below are some prompts to get you thinking about how to apply this information on temperament into real life—your real life.

1. A temperament difference between us that is sometimes challenging is:

2. One aspect of _____’s temperament that I get impatient or judgmental about is:

3. Conflict flares up around this difference between the two of us when:

4. I could say this to myself as a way to increase my empathy and reduce my impatience:
(Because conflicts over temperament differences tend to show up over time (as opposed to right away at the beginning of a relationship), it can be helpful to think about how you viewed the difference early on in the relationship, and to remind yourself of how you care for the person—when you are not stressed out, in a hurry, or frustrated.)

5. One aspect of my temperament that I wish _____ could be more understanding about is:

6. One way (or time) I can communicate about this with _____ so we can work together to try to change the factors that contribute to the conflict is:

Remember: this is all information to help us understand and navigate diversity and difference in our relationships. It is intended to help us have more compassion and patience for each other. It does not justify certain behaviors (i.e. how we behave when we are overwhelmed or distressed) and it does not mean that the other person should always make every effort to cater to our temperaments. It helps us understand why, in certain situations, we behave toward our partner in less-than-ideal ways. It helps us gain insight into why those around us experience the crowded party or the trip to Costco or the sudden change in meeting schedule in the ways that they do. It helps us know what kinds of environments or situations bring out the best in our selves and each other. It helps us talk about it, reduce conflict, and come up with strategies that make life together better.

Words Can Help: Building My Feelings Awareness & Vocabulary

Our feelings are, more often than not, complex. They inform a lot of our experiences, and motivate many of our behaviors and actions.

Understanding our feelings can help us make sense of our own behaviors, choose conscious and intentional actions (rather than unconscious reactions) and navigate the relationships in our lives.

While being aware of our feelings is an important component of any effort toward building healthy relationships, we do not assume that feelings are the *only* thing going on in an interpersonal situation. We simply know that feelings are an important and often overlooked or misunderstood component in what's going on. And we believe that learning, relearning or refamiliarizing ourselves with feeling words is one way (of many) to help ourselves become more aware of our actual feelings so that:

1. We have more ways to recognize and understand our full range of feelings;
2. We have more ways to communicate about them (instead of quietly hoping that the other person interprets our actions the way we want them to and then getting hurt or mad when they don't);
3. In situations of conflict or misunderstanding, we can tease out what's really going on instead of lumping a whole mix of complex feelings under "mad" or "shut down."
4. We can look beneath the surface of our strong initial emotions in any situation (defensive, angry, disbelieving) and make sense of the full mix of things going on inside us; and
5. We gradually navigate the bumps, bends, and hurricanes in our human relationships in more truthful, compassionate, non-violent, and collaborative ways.

Below are two pages of feeling words. Read through them! One list comes from the book "Lesbian Couples: a Guide to Creating Healthy Relationships" by D. Merille Clunis and G. Dorsey Green. The other list comes from our own additional brainstorm.

If you feel that you'd like to grow yourself in this area of awareness and skills-building, try spending a week paying attention to your feelings every day. You could do the following:

1. Try to write down five different feelings that you experience each day.

2. Try to look beneath the surface to expand beyond the “feelings giants” like “good”, “bad,” “mad” or “happy.”
3. If possible, do the week-long exercise with a friend or partner, or share what your experience is like with a friend or partner.
4. As you practice, try to understand and share those feelings that are usually harder for you to reveal. Even if you are saying things out of context and not to the person to whom you wish you could say them, it can be helpful to actually voice them aloud.

Example words from “Lesbian Couples: a Guide to Creating Healthy Relationships” by D. Merilee Clunis and G. Dorsey Green

calm	peaceful	grumpy	ashamed
tender	attractive	confused	foolish
irritated	trapped	apathetic	vulnerable
restless	tired	bored	close
proud	rebellious	shy	warm
touched	overwhelmed	desperate	threatened
pessimistic	anxious	busy	pressured
shaky	excited	happy	stupid
relieved	relaxed	strong	sorry
angry	sexy	content	thrilled
secure	confident	depressed	generous
safe	enthusiastic	hurt	useless
loving	sad	guilty	disappointed

Additions From Our Own Brainstorms:

wired	surprised	suspicious	fearful
crazy	embarrassed	joyous	paralyzed
reckless	competitive	hesitant	insecure
distressed	worried	protective	stupid
hopeless	unsure	concerned	responsible
grateful	ecstatic	hyper	jealous
nervous	weak	distracted	emotional
terrified	privileged	apprehensive	run-down
maxed out	crushed	cautious	exasperated
pleased	special	hopeful	appreciative
motivated	terrified	capable	adoring

For more on how to convey our feelings so they are more seen and understood by others, go to the next section on enhancing our communication skills!

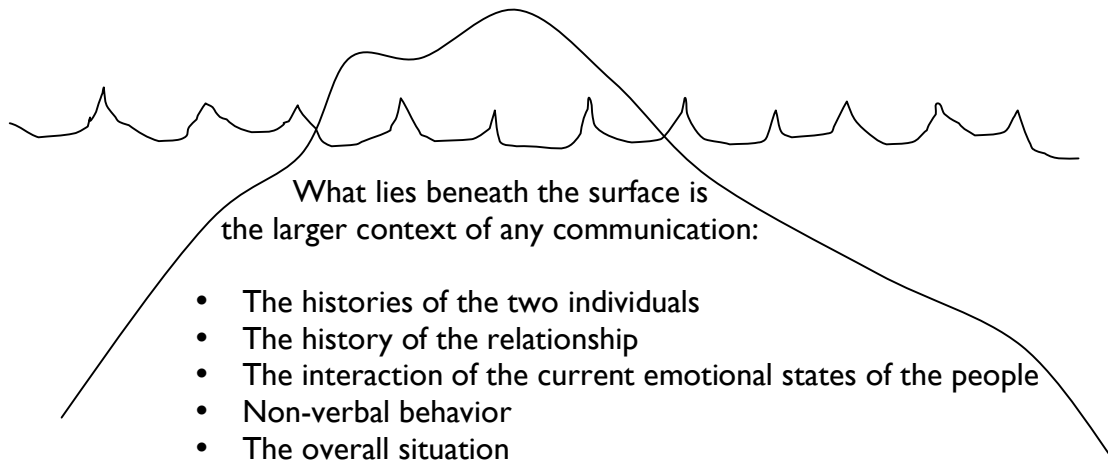
No One's Born With It: Communication as a Craft

Communication is a craft. Good communication can help us be more seen and understood by those we care about; it can help us understand others' behavior and motivations better; it can help the relationships we care about deepen over time and withstand the changes and challenges that life can throw us. With time, commitment, and good-spirited practice, we can become more and more comfortable, knowledgeable, and effective in our communication.

Verbal communication involves listening and expressing: This handout is about the expressing part of communication.

I. The Communication Iceberg

What is on the surface of any communication
—what is actually said—
is like the tip of an iceberg.



In our communication, there is usually a huge amount of information interacting beneath the surface of what we say or do. It can influence what we say, what we hear, how we interpret tone and body language and word choice and content, and how we remember or forget what is said. It can influence whether at the surface, what the listener thought she heard and what the expresser thought she said, match.

When we navigate communication by just working with what we see at the surface, we likely encounter problems, hardships, and surprises. When we understand that communication

involves what's at the surface and a much larger context that is not (but needs to be explored and demystified), we are on our way to uncovering a new day in our relationships.

Think about times that you have navigated direct communication about a challenging topic or situation. What helps you be able to express yourself well so that the other person can hear and understand what you are trying to communicate? Feel free to jot down some of your ideas or experiences.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

In our experience, clearly expressing ourselves requires:

1. Awareness of our own feelings, behaviors, reactions, motivations, etc.
2. Disclosure about what's really going on for us—this often involves facing and showing healthy vulnerability—letting someone really see us so that they have the chance to understand and respond well.
3. Body language that is consistent with (instead of in opposition to) our words.
4. Clarification and shared use of commonly confused expressions of our experiences.

II. Clarifying How We Talk About Our Icebergs

Let's clarify #4 (above) by expanding on four types of commonly confused or even manipulated types of expression.²

I. Observations

What are observations? They are “just the facts” without inference, opinion, or conclusion. They refer to what we have seen, heard, or otherwise personally experienced. “I did the laundry this morning” and “I heard that Daisy is moving to Oakland” are examples of observations.

2. Thoughts

² Types of expression adapted from “Lesbian Couples: a Guide to Creating Healthy Relationships” by D. Merille Clunis and G. Dorsey Green.

What are thoughts? Thoughts depart from observations. They involve coming to conclusions, developing opinions, and sharing beliefs. They are not facts or absolute truths: they contain our values, opinions, beliefs, and theories, and they are often infused with our fears, hopes, and biases. “I did the laundry this morning because I thought you needed clean pants” is a thought. “I heard that Daisy is moving to Oakland—I bet she’s going to want our help” is also a thought. Other examples are below.

- “*Saving Face* was such a great movie.” (Opinion)
- “You were right to quit that job.” (Value judgment)
- “You can’t be in a good relationship and not want to have sex with your partner.” (Belief)
- “You come home later and later because we’re growing apart.” (Theory)

3. Feelings

What are feelings? Feelings are a real and ongoing part of our bodies—our hearts and minds, whether we regularly notice and acknowledge them or not. They are a large part of the backdrop behind our decisions, interpretations, and actions. We can have them in response to what is going on right around us, and we can have them in response to something that happened a long time ago in a different place. They can be extremely intense or quite muted. Everyone grows up learning different messages about how to notice or not notice their feelings, which feelings are okay to express and which are not, what must be controlled and what is understood to be “uncontrollable.” Expressing feelings can be hard. First we have to be aware of and understand our feelings and our unique physical sensations or signs that signal certain feelings. Sometimes we have to dig beneath big initial feelings (i.e. anger) to understand the more hidden feelings motivating them (i.e. uncertainty, fear of abandonment). Then we have to try to express them. Examples of feelings are below. There is also a separate handout related to expanding our vocabulary to help us understand our emotions.

- I felt desperate and crushed when my first girlfriend told me she wanted to break up.
- I feel nervous bringing this up with you because I’m worried you’ll be critical about my plan.
- I felt so happy and relieved when you finally answered my call.
- I feel scared that you’ll get drawn to him and leave me.

4. Wants/Needs

What are wants or needs? When we try to have an intimate relationship without ever clearly expressing our wants or needs, it can be like skiing down a mountain without poles. We can go fast, but we can't navigate the slope: we can't change direction or steer around trees. We all grow up with different messages around how and whether to express our wants and needs. Our cultural upbringings around expressing wants and needs (directly, indirectly, always, never) can clash with the cultures we live in as adults. Someone can express their every want as a desperate need. Someone else can hardly ever express even a truest need. Sometimes we may think our wants and needs should be responded to right away; other times we may expect that they will be ignored. Sometimes we don't voice our wants and needs and then blame others for our upbringing or our choices, or we get disappointed when our loved ones don't anticipate our wants and needs, and then lash out in ways that shock and hurt them. Finding a nice balance in expressing our wants and needs *and* holding those of the other person is a skill that takes time, practice, patience, and encouragement. Examples of expressions of wants and needs are below:

- Could you give me a ride tomorrow night?
- I'd love if we could set a time to talk about our vacation plans—it doesn't have to be right now but I need to get back to my job by next Friday.
- I want to hear what you're really trying to say but I can't do it when you're yelling.
- I think I really need some quiet down time by myself this weekend. Could you take the kids to the park on one of the afternoons while I stay home?

III. Tips for Expressing³

I. "I feel" is different from "I think," but the two are often confused.

Our family and relationship histories and communities are unique. In some relationships, feelings are never talked about. Feelings can be seen as impractical, or as belonging to the weak willed or those with poor self-control. Talking about them is a waste of time and a practice of "other people."

In other relationships and communities, feelings are omnipotent. You can't challenge any phrase or sentence that had the word "feel" in it and certainly not if it started with the phrase "I feel." In those situations, we can become confused because we think that if we

³ First three tips adapted from "Lesbian Couples: a Guide to Creating Healthy Relationships" by D. Merille Clunis and G. Dorsey Green.

talk about our feelings, we are doing good communication. But our conversations go horribly...

It is helpful to clarify how we use the term “feel” vs. terms like “think,” “believe,” or “worry.” In general, feelings are not being expressed clearly when the word “feel” is followed by words such as: 1) that, like, as if; and 2) pronouns like I, you, s/he, or names or nouns referring to people. *I feel hurt* is a feeling. *I feel like you’re trying to hurt me* is not a feeling. It is an opinion and a judgment about the other person’s behavior. *I feel resentful* is a feeling, but *I feel like you’re behaving worse than if you were a total stranger to me* is not.

But feelings and thoughts do co-exist. We can say: *I think that you’re trying to get back at me and I feel upset and mad about it.*

2. In general, it’s helpful to distinguish between what we are feeling and how we think others are behaving.

“I feel attacked” says more about my interpretation of what you are doing than about what I’m feeling. This is also often true with words like: abandoned, betrayed, manipulated, put down, taken for granted, rejected, patronized, etc. Compare: “I feel shut down by you,” with “When you talk on and on about how awesome your new co-worker is, I start to think you are seeing all of the ways she is more the type of person you want to be with. Then I feel totally freaked out and start to withdraw from you.”

3. Not every situation requires all four types of expression, but leaving things out can lead to a fresh layer of misunderstanding.

If we leave out something or we mix up different kinds of expression, our intent probably will not equal the impact on our listener. If we leave out our fear and just throw out an accusation, the conversation will start from a hard place. If we share observations but deliver them with tonal or body language that weights the observation down with heavy unspoken thoughts and feelings, we confuse people and again the conversation starts from a harder place than it has to.

4. A lot of the time, we jump to assumption and attack because we are too scared to be honest and real about our own vulnerabilities.

Sometimes we learn that our fear of abandonment and our need for reassurance are weaknesses that others can exploit in us once they know about them. Or we are so detached from these basic fears that we don’t recognize them in ourselves and only reactively appease them by trying to control and manipulate others to do what we want them to do. Sometimes we learn this through childhood experience. Sometimes we learn it

from our adult relationships. Regardless of its source, the behavior only creates more problems, more isolation, escalated miscommunication and conflict. Try to show as much of the whole picture as you can: what you feel and why it might seem hard to say it out loud.

5. It's important to identify, acknowledge, and push through the messages we give ourselves that cause us to avoid challenging communication and hope that issues will solve themselves.

- “There’s not enough time to get into all of that.”
- “If I bring it up it’ll just start a big fight.”
- “If I don’t make it a big deal, it’ll just blow over.”
- “It’s just my issue that I’m working on.”
- “I shouldn’t feel this to begin with.”
- “It’s done. I don’t want to think about it anymore.”
- “If I tell you, I’ll look weak.”
- “I don’t want to feel sad/scared/vulnerable.”
- “If I let you see how messed up I am you’ll leave me.”
- “I don’t want to hurt her feelings.”
- “I feel bad and it’s all your fault. You should initiate this conversation.”
- “I don’t need anyone’s understanding.”
- More?

General Guidelines for Expressing

1. Be brave. Face yourself and the whole situation. (Be aware of yourself and the whole iceberg).
 2. Be clear and straightforward. (Take the risk. Be known. Share yourself.)
 3. Be honest—but with tact and consideration. (Honesty without compassion –i.e. rudeness followed by “at least I’m being *honest!*” doesn’t work).
 4. Be supportive. (Build bridges. Don’t set fire to them and then drive up into the hills to wait and see if someone calls the fire department to come and put out the fire you made).
 5. Apologize when it’s called for. (Try to do it without caveats about how other people created the situation in which you behaved badly).
-

IV. Communication and Conflict

A healthy relationship is not one in which there is no conflict. Conflict will and does happen. Understanding and aligning responses to conflict that address it sooner rather than later, and that manage rather than escalate it, can make a world of difference.

Below are some ways Chai Chat participants have seen people in their communities (including themselves) respond to conflict.

- Yelling & making up;
- Talking, overtalking, and/or overanalyzing (often as a way to not feel things);
- Ignoring the situation, not addressing it at all;
- Emotional withdrawal;
- Withdrawing affection or attention (for good, or until the other person initiates, or until “you get your way”);
- Physical and/or emotional abuse to gain control or power;
- Victimizing self; threatening to victimize self;
- Passive aggressive behavior
- Cycle of breaking up & getting back together
- Talking with friends but not addressing it with the loved one or partner
- Not being honest about what bothered you
- Responding by bringing up every conflict or dissatisfaction you’ve had in the history of the relationship
- Taking on a victim identity and focusing on deflecting blame (i.e. all problematic behaviors are because of a particular person, forces of oppression, other people’s social privileges, other people acting as triggers, etc.)

How do you see conflict being handled in your life and relationships? How have you addressed it with your partners? With your family members? With your friends? List out a few ways you’ve learned to respond (or not) to conflict.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

What approaches have worked well for you?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Below are some ways people respond to conflict with the goal of resolving it together⁴:

- *Bring issues up sooner rather than later.* Resentments grow like fungus when left in the dark and the intensity of negative feelings increases with time.
- *Ask yourself: "How do I contribute to this conflict?"* to reduce your defensiveness.
- *Soften your "start up" when you bring up a complaint.* This does not necessarily mean that you are hiding your true feelings. A soft start-up can open the door for more complete and successful communication.
- *Stay aware of your own emotional state. Expect some discomfort.* Even when handled really well, conflict is often still uncomfortable. Practice tolerating healthy/necessary discomfort without acting out.
- *Convey that you understand and accept her.* (It is hard, maybe even close to impossible, to accept advice or requests for change when we feel misunderstood, rejected, or judged and found lacking).
- *Treat her with the same respect you would show a guest.* Apply your skills in behaving civilly and sensitively in the outside world to your inside world.
- *Hold yourself to using your best listening and expression skills.*
- *Keep language in the realm of complaints and not criticism.* (i.e. specific and not global).
- *Avoid directing contempt,* which includes sarcasm, cynicism, eye rolling, sneering, name calling, etc, at her. Contempt is poisonous to relationships.
- *Learn to put on the breaks* when your discussion starts going badly. Develop skills to calm the situation by soothing yourself and each other.
- *Make and receive repair attempts.* (i.e. I see your point. I'm sorry. I still love you).

⁴ Adapted from "Lesbian Couples: a Guide to Creating Healthy Relationships" by D. Merille Clunis and G. Dorsey Green.

- *Allow yourself to be influenced* by her. Be collaborative. It's probably not a life/death or win/lose situation.
- *Tolerate each other's human faults.* If you are thinking that everything about her should change, get outside help.
- *Go back through what happened in a fight* instead of gloss over it when something gets better or someone makes a "make-up" overture. Figure out what happened.

What are the top two practices (from the list above or from other ideas you have) that you want to use more (and share with others) in your efforts at healthy conflict resolution?

- 1.
- 2.

In what relationships or situations do you want to start using them?

- 1.
- 2.

Who can support you in these goals? Who can you tell about them?

- 1.
- 2.

If you experience times when you don't use your skills and don't show the good sides of yourself during conflict and later feel regret or shame, what will you do about it? If you get aggressive or mean or bossy or rude, what will you do to face the impact of your choices, make efforts to repair the harm your actions have caused, and get support so that you can meet your goals better next time?

- 1.
- 2.

Remember, communication is a craft. We get better at it over time, and with practice. It can be hard and scary to take the risk to communicate our best and most authentic selves to those we care about. But the pay-off is big!

Active Listening⁵

How many times have you said, felt, or heard “you’re not listening to me!” or gotten into an argument so quickly you didn’t know how you got there? Active listening is a helpful skill to add to any relationship toolbox.

Below is an example of an Active Listening Commitment. Read through it. What aspects of it are you used to doing? Can you remember a time when you did active listening and it helped the situation? What about a time when you didn’t? Can you remember a time when someone actively listened to you? How was it for you?

If you want to practice improving your active listening skills, you can pick actions from the Active Listening Commitment below to try out. Push yourself but also be realistic: you probably won’t start using all of them at once, in every single situation. Pick a couple actions to start using in a relationship that matters to you. Look out for opportunities to use them. Enjoy the feeling you get when you know you have given the compliment of active listening to someone you care about!

Active Listening Commitment

“I believe that active listening...

- is a commitment and a compliment to myself and others;
- often requires proactive initiative to slow down my own assumptions and responses and the assumptions and responses of the other(s) involved;
- commonly involves actions such as:
 - repeating or rephrasing what I think I’ve heard to ensure and show that I am understanding;
 - maintaining and expressing genuine curiosity about why the other person feels the way they feel (or thinks what they think); trying to see their experience through their eyes and seeking to understand the source of their feelings;

⁵ Content in Active Listening Commitment is adapted from “Lesbian Couples: a Guide to Creating Healthy Relationships” by D. Merille Clunis and G. Dorsey Green, 2005.

- showing I can imagine what they are going through by taking a guess at how they may be feeling;
- putting aside the part of me that wants to make a judgment or evaluation about what they're saying;
- pulling the reins on the part of me that wants to jump forward to defend myself from whatever accusations or insinuations I think I hear;
- recognizing that I can be compassionate and sorry for someone else's hard experience regardless of my role or culpability in the situation; and
- giving empathy and understanding even when I do not yet feel totally empathized with or understood."

"I know that the situations in which it's hardest to use good listening skills are often those in which I/we need them the most."

- When I and/or my behavior are being criticized or when the other person is upset with me.
- When both people are simultaneously upset and feeling mistreated and/or not understood.
- When I and/or my partner are trying to cope with fears and feelings of being abandoned or controlled.

"I know that responsibility for active listening sits on the shoulders of every person in a relationship. And I understand that we will likely not simultaneously display the same level of ability and success in all situations."

- We will likely not display the same and simultaneous level of ability and success in all situations—we will not be perfect though our intentions may be.
- When the other person is hurt and scared, I may need to step up and listen more or listen first.
- When I am hurt and scared, the other person may need to step up and listen more or listen first."

Do you have significant concerns around active listening in a current relationship? If you want to focus on improving this aspect of yourself or want to support someone else to, consider being more specific in your efforts, and keeping track of progress so that you can recognize slip-ups, praise accomplishments, and pay attention to trends. With practice and support, we can forge new patterns. A sample log is provided below.

Active Listening Log

Date	Situation in which I actively listened...	Date	1. Situation in which I didn't 2. What I will do differently next time...

Relationship Rituals

Over time, it can be easy for us to get wrapped up in our busy schedules and leave important events or moments of emotional connection as the very last thing we “do” in our relationships. Because of this, these emotional connections can happen less and less frequently, usually through no intention to actively avoid one another, but because we don’t make the time for them.

By building these events in as rituals (formal or informal) they become dependable and intentional times for deriving contact, connection, and meaning in our relationships. And when things get really challenging in a relationship and we are feeling insecure, anxious, or otherwise concerned that everything is unraveling, commitments to simple rituals can be a source of familiarity and security that can help us stay connected enough to figure out how to address whatever is going on.

Try not to get worried that this is too “new age” or complicated or restrictive. Rituals can be complex or simple, long or short. And they do not *have* to be intentionally created. Sometimes people develop their own relationship rituals easily on their own and don’t realize or define what they’re doing until they’re explicitly asked about it. Other times, people benefit from sitting down and intentionally agreeing on rituals that can help them connect or reconnect.

Some people worry that planning rituals equates to a lack or loss of spontaneity or organic emotional development. We ask you to put down your worries and skepticism, and try this approach: Relationship rituals can help you follow-through on your deeper feelings, instead of expect that they will naturally be at the same intensity today, next month, next year, or in ten years. They can help your relationship when one or both people don’t have the energy to be spontaneous, but want to stay connected. And taking the reins to develop relationship rituals can be fun and rewarding, and result in events to look forward to. (If no ideas sound fun or positive, that’s important information to have too).

Talking about relationship rituals with friends can seem a bit embarrassing at first to some, but in our experience it can quickly become a fun, practical, and useful experience. And it’s nice to

hear and chat about the good or cute things people are doing in their relationships instead of only talking when things have turned nasty.

Ultimately, relationship rituals (whether named as such or not) help feed and nurture a relationship across the turbulence of life. Examples of them from past Chai Chat groups and other relationship conversations are included below. Check them out! Just remember: they are like intentional relationship habits that build connection between partners and highlight the existence and identity of the relationship in the context of the world swirling around it.

My partner and I have a phrase called “cranky time.” We use it when one of us is being grumpy and short for no apparent reason toward the other. Sometimes it’s because of something real that’s a response to what’s going on in the moment. In those cases, talking about it and figuring it out are important. But other times, it’s because she hasn’t shed some crankiness from something that happened at work, or on her commute home, and a bit of it is leeching into our time together. Instead of turning it into a big process fest, we just ask: “is this really about what’s going on, or do you need a bit of cranky time?” It’s a way we stay connected by allowing each other to be imperfect. And ironically, calling it out as cranky time usually shortens or puts a stop to it, and the cranky one comes over to get hugged by the one who asked the question.

My partner and I decided always to block off two days in our calendars for just us after I returned from a visit with my family. My family’s homophobia was so intense I always came home really messed up and depressed. I felt totally separate from my partner and she would feel so excited to see me, and then be deflated by my unenthusiastic response of being completely wrapped up in my own thoughts. I always had to visit my family without her and then she always had to feel alone for a second time after my return because I came back the way that I did. She would try to take care of me and be empathetic to me, but I couldn’t really care for her and over time she felt abandoned and rejected. It was our pattern. So we decided that we would create space for us even if we didn’t immediately connect. We would agree not to schedule things with other people during those two days. It was like a relationship retreat.

My best friends are a gay couple who live in Honolulu, a city sometimes mistaken to be a place that accepts queerness. It is actually a place where most LGBT people have to be very closeted about their lives and relationships. There is a lot of faith-based conservatism and hate violence. Before my friends leave their apartment every single morning, they give each other a hug and a kiss. Then they open the door and enter the rest of the world in which they are unable to show each other expressions of love or connection.

Whenever I have a sore throat (which is really often), my partner makes me a special throat tea for me to either drink in bed or bring to work.

My partner's former relationship was really complicated and messy and the child they had together has some challenging issues. When he is living with us, the situation is hard on our relationship. We made a plan to get childcare from one of our friends and shell out \$30 every other week (or every week if necessary) for us to spend an hour in the hot tub together at a place pretty close to where we live. We decided we would do it as a time to rebuild connection even if we were feeling super stressed out and withdrawn from each other. We felt it was valuable as a reliable "away together as just our relationship" practice even if we didn't feeling like talking at all.

My girlfriend and I have a practice where we text each other at least once a day during work to check in and show we are thinking of the other person and hoping their day is bearable.

My boyfriend and I have a date night. It doesn't mean that we necessarily go on a date, but it's a night of every week during which we don't schedule events or activities with other people. Then if we feel like we can afford to go out to dinner, we do. We usually end up going out to dinner twice a month. We love it. It's something I start looking forward to on Monday morning.

This is kind of embarrassing, but before we go to sleep we give each other a (regular) kiss and then touch our feet together and make a kissing sound. Two kisses. Then sleep.

When my partners goes out of town for longer periods of time, she writes me cards before she leaves, and writes the "open on ____" date on the envelope so that they will "last" across the time that she is

away. They are super sweet, and help us stay connected between and in addition to times when we can talk on the phone. They are especially nice because sometimes when we do get on the phone, she and I are both overwhelmed and stressed out by our totally separate days, and our phone conversations end up being more about that than anything else, and we both feel disconnected.

When one of us does something really well or overcomes some big obstacle or deadline, we go to this fancy bakery and get fruit tarts to celebrate. It's a fun treat.

*We have a special way of saying "I love you" that sounds ridiculous but means something to us. It evolved over time. When we say it to each other, it's a reminder of who we are to each other because **no one else** pronounces it that way.*

I know it sounds bad, but we really do connect when we eat dinner in front of the TV three times a week. We have different rented things to watch, and we learn from each other and make each other laugh by commenting on and giving our personal analyses on everything.

Every year we drive to this dancing retreat. It's a relaxed weekend of couple's / ballroom dancing. Everyone there knows us as a couple, and it's nice to be seen and appreciated by everyone that way. It's like an annual reminder of our selves as a couple. It feels good. We need it.

Below is a chart that lists times or events commonly associated with relationship rituals. Look through the list and think about a current or past relationship. What rituals have you been a part of? What rituals have you observed or heard of? Are there relationship rituals you'd like to create?

Time / Event	Examples or Ideas
Bedtime	
Morning	
Leave-Taking (short term)	
Leave-Taking (long term)	
Reuniting (short term)	
Reuniting (long term)	
Food Shopping / Food Prep'n / Appreciation	
Mealtimes	
Eating Out	
After-Meal Time	
Stress-Reduction (daily or event-related)	
Affectionate Invented Language (creates insider status, bonding effect)	

Invented Language to Reference Shared Understanding / History	
Dates & Getaways	
Initiating / Refusing / Having / Talking About Sex	
When One Person Gets Sick	
Celebrations of Triumph	
Healing from Bad Luck, Failure, Fatigue, Exhaustion	
Reconnection After Disagreement or Argument	
Entertainment	
Keeping in Touch with Family and Friends	
Vacations	
Birthdays	
Anniversaries	

Holidays	
Other:	
Other:	

Recognizing and Overcoming Suppression ...and the Conflict that it Causes⁶

Many of us are raised in environments where we are taught (directly as well as indirectly) to suppress certain kinds of feelings. We learn that certain feelings are okay, and other feelings are not. We might learn to suppress them as part of our gendered upbringing; or suppression of feelings might be part of our family culture. But when we don't acknowledge our strong feelings, try to hide them, or tell ourselves that they are wrong or shameful or weak, we suppress feelings that, like it or not, are there and are real.

When we get in relationships as adults (with co-workers and friends as well as intimate partners), these patterns of suppression can play out in unpleasant ways. For example, we can suppress our feelings until they burst out in ways that surprise others (and even ourselves). Or on the flip side, someone might respond to their upbringing in a different way, expressing every unexpressed emotion they have ever had with a charged empowerment and defiance (that can be experienced as entitlement or dominance by others in a relationship context).

Patterns of suppression and unreflective compensation for suppression can hurt everyone involved and weaken the fiber of a relationship. So let's do something about it: Let's learn to recognize and understand common dynamics of suppression, and come up with useful ways to address them!

So what is it?

Suppression happens when we don't share what we think and feel...

1. We censor our thoughts and feelings (sometimes even from ourselves) because of:
 - Risk of humiliation, embarrassment
 - Self-judgment (e.g. I shouldn't, I'm unworthy, it's selfish or "messed up," it's my issue)
 - Risk of conflict (and fears of abandonment or other scary things)
 - Risk of hurting partner's feelings (or seeming unresponsive to them)
 - Pessimism/fatalism (it won't make a difference and then I'll feel worse)

2. We encourage this censorship in each other when we respond to something our partner shares by not taking it seriously, making accusatory statements (selfish, immature, pathological, weak), being abrupt, unsympathetic, or offering superficial advice.

⁶ Prepared by Shawna Sodersten MFTI 2009 with Orchid Pusey, adapted from the work of Dan Wile.

What's the big deal?

What can happen when we don't share what we think and feel...

1. It is harder to understand our own strong feelings:

- We may look far and wide for any way to explain/justify them. If our explanation or justification feels weak and is questioned by others, we respond with rigidity (desperate and unyielding) that looks irrational.
- We may have panic attacks and bizarre behaviors.
- We turn big doubts (do you love me?) into a vigilant focus on concrete issues (e.g., when you're late, you show that you don't care about me, when you go out without me, you show that you want to have an affair).

2. We pull for our partner to "mind read:"

- We have a vague, half-conscious hope that our partner will spontaneously fulfill our needs.
- We lay out "controversial" thoughts in obscure/semi-disguised ways and leave it to others to acknowledge them or not.
- Our partners are left to provide their own (often inaccurate) guesses about our desires and explanations for our behavior.
- When faced with inevitable disappointment, we don't recognize it as such and just feel (and act) withdrawn, angry, and lonely.

3. We try to manipulate our partner into giving us what we want:

- We are cautious and indirect because of our unarticulated or unexplored feelings of pessimism/fatalism/powerlessness.

4. We compulsively compromise and suppress expectations, then hit a breaking point without our partner ever knowing it was building up. The feelings then emerge in distorted and/or exaggerated forms:

- Sarcastic remarks, irritability, whining
- Blurted out resentments in an argument
- Placing of fault on our partner
- Aggressive behaviors, tantrums, accusations
- Clinging, pleading/longing looks
- Sudden or demanding questions: "Do you love me?" "Why don't you ever _____?"

- Entitlement to our long-hidden feelings and wants in ways that repress those of our partner

Then what happens?

Intimacy becomes impossible and isolation the norm...

1. When we consistently suppress negative feelings, we have a hard time expressing spontaneously positive feelings.

2. When partners try to avoid conflict by carefully selecting what can and can't be expressed.

This gradually does the following:

- Cuts off the partners from each other;
- Undermines equality (one or both are put in the position of caretaking or guessing the other's emotions), and isolates partners from each other (even the best unilateral efforts to solve conflict or avoid potential conflict are, by their nature, isolating);
- Deprives partners of the satisfaction and freedom to express important relationship feelings;
- Produces an undercurrent of impending danger (i.e. conflict);
- Removes much of the spark, interest, and spontaneity from their interactions; and
- Leaves them (or one) with little to say to the other.

3. Feelings or worries that partners keep from each other have a tendency to become increasingly preoccupying, pushing each into the isolation of their own thoughts.

4. Not being able to talk about flaws ("here is something I view as a flaw in myself and I worry you will not like me because of it") means your partner can't integrate it into their behavior, or become your ally in facing it.

5. Not being able to say we don't feel sexual or intimate perpetuates feelings of distance and/or repulsion. Being able to say it paradoxically frees up the possibility of more positive feelings.

The solution:

Own our stuff and be brave about sharing and listening.

1. Acknowledge that we feel what we feel: that is real. All feelings/desires (even the selfish, immature, and "messed up" ones) can be taken seriously as information about what is happening in the relationship. They do not dictate a certain course of action; they inform the situation. And when we acknowledge our real feelings and our real vulnerabilities, we are brave

enough to be our authentic selves, and can better gauge and evaluate how others choose to behave toward us.

2. Confide in each other to review distressing or unresolved issues and celebrate successes and good times. This is having a relationship with each other ABOUT the relationship.

- Validate when each is simultaneously in an impossible/frustrating/no-win/depriving situation, and each feels deprived/trapped/isolated/taken for granted/cut off (rather than judging each other as immature, selfish, lazy, etc.).
- Develop a shared understanding of the points at which our conversations break down.
- Go beyond “concrete” complaints to deeper feelings.
 - MANY complaints translate to: “I’ve had doubts lately about how much real affection there is between us (or how much you really care about me), and I’m pretty distressed about it.”
 - Share the whole story of your dilemma: your complaint or desire AND your fear of your partner’s reaction (that they will criticize, be hurt, not care, etc.).
 - What is the truth (even though you wish it weren’t) behind your concern?
 - What is the hidden reason behind why it is so important to you?

3. Talk about suppression with each other, share where or how we each learned it in the ways that we did, understand the situations in which we are most likely to suppress our thoughts and feelings, identify how our own patterns might help or hinder the other (i.e. one person’s hard-won and maybe dominant expression shuts down the other person who is trying to overcome suppression), and develop agreements and strategies to support each other to develop new ways of communicating.

4. Remember to separate suppression (of feelings) from action. Refrain from using “I’m breaking free of the suppression my family taught me” to justify words and actions that disregard or harm others. Taking our own feelings seriously does not mean invalidating others’ reactions to them. The point is to acknowledge and understand everyone’s feelings.

5. Remember that no couple can avoid all fights and hurt feelings, but we can learn how to recover from these times, and reduce their frequency and intensity.

Remembering the common reasons for suppressing thoughts or feelings, is there anything you're aware of that you have been thinking or feeling that you haven't yet been able to say out loud, or a conversation that goes round and round without getting anywhere better?

What are ways your partner (or close friend, family member, or co-worker) can support you to share your thoughts and feelings before they fester?

What are ways you can support your partner (or close friend, family member or co-worker) to share what's going on with them sooner rather than later?

That thing we always fight about: Breaking Free from Gridlock

Below are some classic examples of differences between partners that can become the focal points of recurring conflict. Unless some resolution or “truce” is reached, these conflicts can erode respect and compassion in the relationship. It can be useful and empowering to name these and other perpetual issues, and share gridlock-loosening strategies with one another.

Perpetual problems in this context are either (1) fundamental differences in our personalities that repeatedly create conflict, or (2) fundamental differences in our life style needs. “Needs” in this case are practices or perspectives that are basic to our sense of ourselves and to who we are as people. They may shift over the course of time and context, but in general they are regularly part of us. We call them “gridlocked” if the conflicts over the differences keep causing hurt, pain, or feelings of rejection, and efforts to resolve the conflict have become stuck.

The following table of perpetual issues can be used as an exercise. You can do this exercise on your own, with someone you’re in a relationship with, or as a member of a group or workshop.

1. Look through the included list of common perpetual differences first, and/or generate your own list of perpetual differences in your relationship.
2. Look over your list(s). (If you’re doing the exercise with a person you’re in a relationship with, compare each other’s lists). If you come across an issue that is a perpetual difference or problem that is present in your relationship but you’ve been able to successfully dialogue about it or otherwise steer it away from becoming a perpetual conflict, congratulations! Circle or highlight the item. Negotiating this difference is a strength in your relationship. If you’re doing this exercise as an individual in a group, share your path-clearing successes with others.
3. Look over the list(s) again. (Remember: you may use the following list, and add other items of your own). Are there issues that have become perpetual/gridlocked conflicts?
4. Select one and only one gridlocked perpetual issue in your relationship that you wish to discuss with your partner, and put a check next to it.
5. Is there something you can learn about the feelings underlying this issue? What would it look like if things were easier? What aspects of your strengths (related to negotiating other differences) can you apply to this issue? Make a plan for navigating this difference, including committing to trying out your plan for a specified period of time and then coming back together to share how it was for each person. Be careful not to make the plan too big and lofty! Start with modest goals that incorporate awareness that you won’t experience 100% success right away. Build your successes step by step. Share your plan with others to boost accountability and a feeling of being seen and supported.

Common Perpetual Differences, Issues, and/or Conflicts:

Differences in emotionality	One person is very emotionally expressive and the other is not so expressive; one person values exploring emotions more than the other.
Differences in being people-oriented	One person is more extroverted and gregarious while the other is more introverted and private.
Differences in wanting time together versus time apart and alone	One person wants more time alone; the other person wants more time together.
Differences in independence	One person feels a greater need to feel independent or connected. This can reflect basic differences in the balance of autonomy vs. interdependence.
Differences in interpersonal approaches	One person wants to talk; the other person wants to do. One needs to process out loud; the other likes to process alone. One experiences verbal processing as normal and helpful; the other experiences verbal processing as unbearable and “useless.”
Differences in expressions of love, caring, or intimacy	Each person wants what the other person does not easily or naturally give (e.g. positive feedback or love that is expressed as verbal, physical, tangible in the form of gifts, helpful in the form of acts of service, or experienced in the form of quality time).
Differences in optimal sexual frequency	One person wants sex more frequently than the other.
Differences in preferred sexual styles	Partners have differences in what they each want from sex. For example, one might see intimacy as a precondition to sex, while the other experiences sex as a path to intimacy.
Differences in punctuality	One person is habitually late, and to the other it is important to always be on time or early.

Differences in neatness & organization	Partners have different thresholds/comfort levels regarding neatness/clutter, standards of “clean” or needs for organization and structure.
Differences in activity level	One person prefers highly active physical recreation while the other prefers less active physical recreation or sedentary recreation (prone yoga). One is always trying to be on the move; the other is always trying to find stillness.
Differences in preferred influence	One person is more dominant in initiation and/or decision-making; the other prefers equal influence.
Differences in ambition and/or the importance of work and career	One person is significantly more ambitious and oriented toward career development. The other is equally ambitious in different directions, or is less ambitious and more likely to seek regularity/stability and feel content.
Differences in excitement	One person feels a greater need to have life be exciting or adventurous than the other. One person experiences excitement as more risky and unpleasant, or just unimportant.
Differences in values	There are significant differences in what each person values in life both in terms of outcomes as well as process.
Differences in preferred style of life	There are major differences in the way each chooses to live life on an everyday basis (e.g. Go out or stay in, minimalist or hoarder, quiet or loud, scheduled or free-flowing, vegan or meat-loving, morning person or night person, reading or television, etc.)
Differences with respect to intimacy expectations / agreements	There are significant differences in the way each person relates to their relationship in the context of other close friendships and/or intimate relationships. (e.g. differences in depth or range of emotional connection with people outside the relationship, differences in levels of desired physical connection with others, differences related to partners’ comfortable levels of flirtation within and outside the relationship, differences in partners’ responses to the other’s distress and to when intimacy expectations or agreements are broken).

Differences with respect to normal or acceptable conflict or “fight” behavior	There are significant differences in the way the two people respond to conflict with each other and/or with family members or friends.
Differences in accepting of responsibility	There are significant differences in the way each person self-reflects and takes responsibility for themselves and their actions.
Differences in approaching finances	One person is more financially conservative and/or focused on saving for the future, while the other wants to spend more than the other, and has a philosophy more of living (spending) for the moment.
Differences with respect to kin (I)	One person wants more independence from kin/family, while the other wants more closeness.
Differences with respect to kin (II)	One person’s family accepts the relationship and treats the other partner well; The other person’s family does not recognize the relationship, and either does not recognize or is hostile toward the other partner.
Differences with respect to religion	One person values religious practices or values more than the other, or each person upholds different religious practices or values.
Differences with respect to drugs and alcohol	One person is significantly more tolerant and/or engaged in substance use than the other.
Differences in how to approach household chores (if a sharing household)	One person may want more of an equal division of household labor, while the other does not. Or one person may prefer daily or weekly chores while the other person prefers seasonal cleaning.
Differences in how to raise and discipline children or pets (I)	One person is more involved with the responsibilities of taking care of the dependents than the other, and this is in conflict with what they or the other partner wants.
Differences in how to raise and discipline	One person is stricter or more of the boundary holder with the dependents while the other person wants more flexibility or fluidity with

the children or pets (II)	the children or pets.
Other:	
Other:	
Other:	

Unpacking an Argument

This approach to unpacking and recognizing our reactions and actions in our relationships can help us defuse or de-escalate a loaded situation, and create understanding and empathy out of what could otherwise become a pained argument or conflict.

We intend it as one possible guide for understanding, debriefing and learning from what happens when you and your partner (or other person in your life) have hard moments, interactions, or arguments. It is designed to increase understanding between two people so that over time, the conflict or argument can reduce in intensity and frequency and not grow into a bigger or seemingly irresolvable problem.

The idea is to help us see that in most communication, there is no single “objective reality” but rather two “subjective realities,” and to uncover the thoughts, assumptions, and feelings that operate beneath the surface of the argument. (However, we make clear that though we each make subjective interpretations of the things or conversations that happen in our relationships, no subjective realities justify actions of aggressive control, manipulation, or violence).

Each side of a conflict, misunderstanding, or hard feeling can be broken down into the following pattern:

Event → Interpretation (assignment of meaning) → Reaction (emotion) → Action/Decision
 Here are some examples:

Event→	Interpretation→	Reaction→	→ Action/Decision
Partner works late	She cares more about her job than about me	Anger, sadness, disappointment, feelings of rejection or abandonment, etc.	Confront her; or Hide feelings (that will pop out later under stress); or Act out
Partner yells during an argument	Violence will soon follow	Fear, anger, contempt	Leave; and/or Attack; or Placate
Partner wants daily check-in calls during separation	He wants to control me	Fear of engulfment, anger	Confront him (tell him he's being controlling/need); or Hide feelings (they'll pop out later or as irritability now); and/or Evade calls
Partner wants alone time	She is rejecting me	Fear of rejection or abandonment, anger, sadness, disappointment	Confront her (tell her she's being cold or insensitive to your needs); Hide feelings (they'll pop out later); Withdraw in retaliation
Partner fails to notice something (e.g. that I'm sad, overwhelmed, busy)	He doesn't care; my needs are not important to him	Anger, sadness, disappointment, resentment	Confront him (If you really loved me you'd...); Hide feelings (they'll pop out later); Act out

Across the four points, there are two places where we can grow and change in ways that improve our experience of the relationship. We cannot change an event that has already happened, but our interpretation of events—that is, the meaning we assign to them—changes as our understanding of each other and our relationship dynamics change. We cannot control our reactions—emotions are a primarily physiological process—but *we can try to create some breathing room between our reaction and the action/decision so that there is time to take in more information and see our action or decision as a choice we make.*

The meaning we assign to an event is partly about what is happening in the moment and partly (often more) about what our past experiences have taught us. Often, we assign meaning without consciously thinking about it, and therefore without leaving any room for questioning it in the moment.

Think of a few arguments, misunderstandings, or situations of hard feelings from a relationship of yours. Start by jotting down some basics about what actually happened and how you responded in the moment.

Event	My Interpretation	My Reaction/Feelings	My Action/Decision

Can you come up with at least one alternative interpretation for each event? How could that impact your reaction? Does it open up new choices for your action or decision?

For example, another interpretation of the first event from the first chart is that the partner's working late has more to do with anxieties related to work than a devaluing of time with you. Considering the possibility of this interpretation may allow you a reaction of empathy that can exist alongside your feelings of disappointment. This in turn suggests an action of sincerely asking the partner what is happening for/in her when the time she intended to leave passes but she keeps working.

The empathy that your question and exploration shows can in turn make it easier for her to hear your feelings of disappointment with less defensiveness, and allow you both to see that it is a difficult situation you are in together, in which both people are suffering. Once both sides feel (to whatever extent possible) heard and empathized with, you can begin exploring and experimenting with solutions that are responsive to both the desire to be together and the need to cope with the work-related anxieties.

Now look back to the events you jotted down in your own chart. What kinds of questions would you want to ask in order to expand your interpretation of the event, to learn about what's going on for the other person, and to show openness and empathy? Are there ways you can imagine slowing down the time between your emotional reaction (to your interpretation of the event) and your decision or action?

Talk about this approach with someone you're in a relationship with, be it a partner, family member or friend. Try it out together! Remember: Patterns are hard to break. Build in ways to celebrate achievements and respond constructively when someone slips up and it looks like "the same thing is still happening."

Identifying & Unlearning Our Own Violence

**... a proactive way to learn
better and happier ways
to be in relationship to others**

Do you sometimes use behaviors that you are not proud of? We all do. Do you cringe when you think of your role in certain arguments or break-ups in your past? Are you resistant or embarrassed to admit or talk about these things? Can you imagine taking accountability as a liberating act for yourself and for others?

This exercise is geared toward helping us to face ourselves, our partners, our friends and our families, and to pro-actively get support in unlearning our own uses of violence so that we can build relationships based in honest reflection, connection and respect rather than in power-grabbing, aggressive “self-preservation” and fear.

It assumes the following:

1. We all experience stress, insecurity, frustration, disappointment, uncertainty, embarrassment, anger, and fear;
2. We all learn and develop our own coping mechanisms and responses to hard situations—we learn them from a very young age in our families of origin when we are uniquely impressionable as well as in response to significant experiences later in our lives;
3. We all observe and learn violence, and have the potential to use it and abuse power in harmful ways;
4. It can be easy to give the best of ourselves to people outside of our closest family relationships; it is much harder to consistently save the best of ourselves for those closest to us—those who are with us when no one else is watching;
5. It can be easy to make excuses for our own problematic behavior and dodge responsibility rather than stand up and own our own choices and mistakes;
6. When we don't examine our uses of violence and its impacts on others (as well as on ourselves), our problematic patterns can wreak havoc, degrade our relationships, and hurt those we love and those who love us;
7. When we learn about ourselves and make proactive changes away from violence, we enable our relationships to bring some peace and connection into every day and to improve our communities and lives in powerful and meaningful ways; and
8. Exercises like this facilitate spring cleaning for our relationships, helping us to identify and unlearn our own problematic behavioral patterns that can otherwise squash the peace and connection out of a relationship and replace it with turmoil and pain; they are

intended to help us experience the positive outgrowths of understanding and taking accountability for our behaviors so that we can create relationships of respect, fun, and happiness.

The following exercises are excerpts from a workshop that grew out of several national gatherings of advocates and activists working to address intimate partner violence in Asian Pacific Islander lesbian, bisexual, queer women and transgender communities. It was piloted in 2006. The network of advocates and activists and the series of gatherings were called “Transforming Silence Into Action” or TSIA. Participants in TSIA recognized that there were few tools or models to do this kind of work within grassroots communities or within the anti-violence movement. Participants also understood that people have complex relationships to violence (having perpetrated it, survived it, witnessed it, colluded in it, etc.), and that examining our histories and our uses of violence can help us in our own lives as well as better equip us to support others who are in the position of needing and wanting to be accountable for *their* violence. We centered exercises and discussions on the following five goals:

1. Build the value of critical self-reflection, accountability, and change within activist and anti-violence spaces, and within our communities;
2. Provide tools for identifying and unlearning potentially unhealthy behavior(s) and/or abusive behavior within ourselves;
3. Build capacity and resources for doing this work within queer API communities;
4. Begin to lift the shame and silence around these behaviors in a constructive, direct way; and
5. Generate new norms for healthy relationships and self-motivated change in our relationships and communities.

Considerations in doing this exercise:

1. Change happens, but not overnight. It takes understanding, patience, practice, and practice, and more practice. We learn our patterns over time, and often over the course of our growing up, when we are sponges for learning (whether helpful or unhelpful). It is easier to change our patterns if we expect that it will be a process we commit to, not a single task or moment.

2. Find time, space, and quiet in which to do this thinking and work. If you like to do it with others at the same time, then go for it! If you prefer to do it alone and then share with someone later, that's fine too.
3. Unlearning violence works best when we have support. Find one or more people to with whom to share your journey. Choose someone who sees your strengths and can support you to face the patterns you'd like to change. It helps if you have some shared understanding about violence and oppression, and about the impacts of violence both on those who use it and those who are the targets of violence. Broadly consider how you can work together.

Examples include the following:

- a. You can debrief your experiences with your support person/people;
 - b. You can make commitments that you will tell them about both your steps forward and your steps backward;
 - c. You can acknowledge together that long-lasting positive behavioral change often requires a long up-and-down process during which progress can at times be frustratingly unclear, unknown, or even backwards;
 - d. You can tell the person you are in a relationship with about your efforts and about the people who are supporting you;
 - e. You can tell your partner that when you exhibit the behaviors or patterns you are trying to change and don't want to tell anyone about them, s/he can tell your support people for you.
4. Praise yourself for your achievements, and face yourself and those you've hurt when you slip back into old harmful ways.

Identifying Our Uses of Violence: Self Reflection Writing Exercise I

Spend some time (you might use 30 minutes) thinking about and writing or drawing your responses to the following questions. You can use poetry, complete sentences, stick figures...whatever works for you.

- I. Most of us engage at some point in behavior that can be unhealthy or potentially abusive. What does that behavior look like in me?
 - a. What is happening around me when I behave this way? What is actually happening, and how do I feel about it or interpret meaning into it?
 - b. How do I feel when I behave this way?
 - c. What do I get out of it? What does it cost me?
 - d. What does it cost _____ (insert name)? What it is like for _____?
 - e. How or when do I think that it could be wrong or problematic?
 - f. What are warning signs for me that the unhealthy behavior is becoming a problematic pattern?

Unlearning Our Violence :
Self Reflection Writing Exercise II

- I. How do I unlearn this behavior?
 - a. What environments, experiences, people, etc. are connected to how I learned this behavior?
 - b. Are there ways in which my own behavior is related to violence I have experienced?
 - c. When I am in a similar situation again, how do I want to respond differently?
 - d. What excuses have I used for my behavior that I do not want to use anymore?
 - e. Why? What do I gain and lose by responding in this changed way?
 - f. How will I be a better person to _____ if I respond in this new way?

Making It Stick.

Getting Support for Myself: Everyone Starts with First Steps

- I. What are concrete steps & practices that can get me to start responding in this new way and make it stick? Knowing that it can be hard, how can I start to undo old patterns and make new ones?
 - a. What kinds of support do I need?
 - b. What resources do I have?
 - c. What is one concrete action step I can take in the next day?
 - d. What are two other concrete action steps I can take this week?
 - e. Who will I tell about having taken these steps? Who will support me through this journey?
 - f. If I have a pretty serious pattern of using violence against someone, who will support the person I have harmed as I go through this journey?
 - g. How will I not let myself off the hook (even if others do)?
 - h. How will I celebrate my successes?

Bottom Lines⁷ to Lean On

What happens when we aren't at our best? What happens when we are really upset and we don't manage to put our best skills and selves to use? This exercise can help you think about a safety net of sorts that you and your partner can weave together. While we of course want to focus on building positive and healthy practices, we also cannot pretend that we will all be perfect all of the time. In some situations it can be helpful to create bottom lines for how we behave when we are in conflict with each other.

“What’s a bottom line?”

In this context, a bottom line is a concrete behavior that we commit we will not resort to even when we are really angry or extremely stressed out or scared. It is something that creates a sense of safety and assurance to our selves and our partners. Bottom lines will look different in different relationships.

We can have bottom lines for ourselves, and bottom lines for our relationships. Examples could look like this:

1. We will not threaten to harm ourselves as a result of something our partner said or did.
2. We will not run out into the street in the middle of the night or make our partner run after us out of fear for our physical wellbeing.
3. We will not threaten suicide or homicide during a fight.
4. We will not bring up intimate things our partner revealed to us in confidence in aggressive, cruel, or retaliatory ways.

The most important thing is to make them concrete and separate from general positive behavioral commitments such as “I promise to see my partner as a whole and individual person” or “I commit to listening with compassion.” We can have those too! But keeping them separate from bottom lines is important and helpful. If in a charged argument my partner does not listen to me with compassion during the whole conversation, I am not going to condemn her as having broken a key agreement and core value of mine. But if she knows and breaks one of my bottom lines, it's a signal to me that something in the relationship needs attention. It's a signal that helps us know when to focus and turn away from common paths of denial, minimizing, or selective amnesia. It's pro-active intervention and prevention all in one.

⁷ Created by Orchid Pusey, 2009, major idea drawn from “Lesbian Couples: a Guide to Creating Healthy Relationships” by D. Merille Clunis and G. Dorsey Green, 2005.

“Wait a minute—is this like laying down ultimatums?”

Bottom lines can look different ways to different people and in different relationship contexts. The bottom line just exists. It is like a marker for you. It does not define what happens if you or your partner breaks it: that’s for you to decide. It does, however, serve as a signal to you when someone does break it. It signals to you that something is not well, and needs immediate attention.

For some people, the bottom line might be part of a trust-building or healing process to get out of harmful patterns. In those cases, acknowledging and responding when a bottom line is broken is incredibly important. In some cases, coming up with an agreed-upon consequences (like the following) for breaking a bottom line can actually be really helpful for both people: *If I throw something again during an argument, I will spend the night in a hotel or motel, and arrange for payment and transportation on my own.*

Take a few minutes to jot down five bottom lines that you would like to be able to count on in your relationship.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Why are these important to you? Share them with your partner, and invite them to join you in brainstorming five bottom lines that they would like to count on. Do they overlap with yours? Why are those bottom lines important to them?

My partner’s list:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

If you have bottom lines for yourself as part of a concrete effort to break free of some old patterns, you can note down the new or replacement behaviors you plan on using. You can write those next to your bottom lines.

I will take this old behavior I learned...

...and try to do this instead!

1.

→

2.

→

3.

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4.

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5.

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Send-Off

We hope that you have gotten some helpful ideas from these materials, and that you can take this handbook and “run with it.” Apply whatever relates to you in ways that work for your relationships; share it with your friends and loved ones; and use it to start conversations that open new possibilities for your communities. You can try coming back to it periodically as well—you may find you get different things out of it each time you read through it.

This handbook doesn’t contain “final answers” about or for relationships—we are learning and growing together with you, and we are interested in your thoughts and ideas! Please feel free and encouraged to share them with us. If you have thoughts or questions on the content in the handbook, experiences you’d like to share, or ideas on how to spread these ideas and conversations to others who would benefit from it, please contact:

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Experience and research both show that relationships experienced as “successful” by all parties are ones in which positive interactions greatly outnumber negative interactions. You can play a big role in launching that dynamic and creating the culture of your relationship(s). Try things out: Create cultures of appreciation, initiate a positive (instead of negative) feedback loop between you and your partner, dig deep for the best of yourself, model practices of patience and compassion, talk to your friends, and forgive yourself so you can openly and constructively reflect on your stumbles and imperfections. Finally, know that you can’t do it all by yourself: Healthy relationships are not created and sustained by one person alone. But as soon as one person begins to change, the relationship (and the community surrounding it) is never the same.