16 TOOLS FOR EMOTIONAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING Joshua N. Hook

THE -

MENTAL HEALTH

TOOLKIT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TOOL 1	SELF-AWARENESS	3
TOOL 2	THOUGHTS, FEELINGS, AND BEHAVIORS	5
TOOL 3	WORKING WITH THOUGHTS	7
TOOL 4	CHANGING BEHAVIORS	10
TOOL 5	UNDERSTANDING FEELINGS AND NEEDS	13
TOOL 6	STAY IN YOUR OWN BUSINESS	17
T00L 7	THE POWER OF LIMITS	19
T00L 8	SOLVING PROBLEMS	22
T00L 9	ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION	26
T00L 10	GETTING MORE HELP	30
T00L 11	WORKING THROUGH YOUR Family and past	34
T00L 12	CONNECTING WITH OTHERS	37
T00L 13	BOUNDARIES	40
T00L 14	COMMUNICATION	43
T00L 15	CONFLICT	47
T00L 16	FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION	50

INTRODUCTION

I've been through a lot of school over the years. I started school in 1989 at the local Montessori classroom a few miles down the road. After graduating from kindergarten (Whew!), I went to school every single year until 2010, when I graduated with my Ph.D. from Virginia Commonwealth University. That's over 20 years of school!

For the most part, I loved school. I learned a lot of things—math, english, spanish, art, social studies, psychology, history, and chemistry, among other things. We send our kids to school every day, and they learn a bunch of things over the years as well.

Here's the tough reality: Most of the things we learn in school don't really apply to our lives that much. We forget about most of the things we learn soon after we learn them. That's kind of the nature of school.

As a psychology professor, I've done quite a bit of research on mental health and wellbeing. I'm also a licensed psychologist, and I have counseled people about the most pressing problems in their lives. I've also done quite a bit of my own counseling over the years, working through my own issues and struggles.

Through all these experiences, I am convinced that the world would be a better place if we each had a few basic mental health tools. Most of us didn't learn how to be emotionally healthy from our families growing up. Our parents were dealing with their own issues, and they passed their issues on to us.

Often, we need more help. What are the basic components of mental health? What is the "low hanging fruit" that can make the biggest difference in our personal lives and relationships?

In this book, I want to give you some basic tools for positive mental health and wellbeing. If you can take these 16 tools and use them regularly in your life, you will become more self-aware and better able to solve your problems, engage in meaningful work, and develop satisfying relationships.

If you want more help with solving problems, clarifying your values, and living on purpose, follow my blog posts at <u>www.JoshuaNHook.com</u>

-Josh

SELF-AWARENESS

100L

The foundation of good mental health begins with self-awareness. Mental health involves paying attention to what is happening inside you (e.g., your thoughts, feelings, and needs), and then making good decisions in light of that. Most people, however, live their lives more or less on autopilot. Things are happening inside them, but they aren't able to deal with their internal states in an adaptive way, because what's happening inside is so powerful.

The starting place for getting a handle on your internal states is self-awareness. Self-awareness involves slowing down and paying attention to the things that are happening inside you. It involves prioritizing self-reflection, because we know that what is happening inside us can give us important information about ourselves. It involves being able to withstand some discomfort as we face our internal states rather than running away from them. And it involves some learning about how to identify and talk about what is happening inside us. Let's go over some of the key steps of self-awareness.

4 KEY STEPS TO SELF-AWARENESS

- 1. **Create space.** Many of us rush through life, moving from one thing to the next. Part of this rushing is because we're busy—we have so many things going on, and we have too many commitments. But another part of this rushing is that we're uncomfortable with what might come up for us if we slow down. We get bored easily. We distract ourselves with TV or social media. The first step to self-awareness is to create some space. Carve out some time in your day to reflect on what is going on inside you.
- 2. Value the inside. Some people aren't self-aware because they don't care too much about what is happening on the inside. They don't see the value in taking time to reflect and turn the focus inward. But as we will see, the things

that happen on the inside are key to goals like being happy, successful at work, having good relationships, and living a meaningful life. There is a direct correlation between what happens on the inside and our life on the outside. It's important to recognize that connection, in order to do the hard work of ordering our private world.

- 3. Withstand discomfort. Sometimes it can be uncomfortable to look at what is going on inside us. We may not always like what we see. It's normal to avoid discomfort, but in our society today, we have become professionals at seeking comfort and avoiding discomfort. We develop coping strategies to keep our inner states pushed down outside of our awareness. In the extreme version of this, we develop addictions that help keep our inner discomfort at bay. The journey toward mental health begins with self-awareness. But this means you will be asked to take a hard look at yourself, both the things you are proud of and the things you may not like about yourself. This process may bring up uncomfortable feelings, such as anger, anxiety, guilt, shame, and sadness. You will be asked to sit with these difficult inner states and explore them. This process may not always be fun, but the payoff is huge.
- 4. Learn how to identify and communicate our inner world. I grew up with two parents who were counselors, so when I was a kid, we had family meetings where we would share about our feelings. This isn't the reality for most people. Most people don't learn how to think and talk about their inner states until a crisis occurs and they go to counseling for themselves. This is important information and learning, but most of us don't get it growing up. Learning how to identify and communicate about your thoughts, feelings, and needs is an important first step for dealing with your inner states in an adaptive way.

ACTION STEP



Carve out an hour at some point this week to be by yourself with no distractions. Turn off the cell phone and TV. Disconnect from the internet. Just sit and be quiet for an hour and see what comes up for you. Let your mind wander and go where it wants to go. Take a journal and a pen, and write down whatever comes up for you.



THOUGHTS, FEELINGS, AND BEHAVIORS

One key piece of learning when working toward mental health is that our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are all connected and influence one another. For example, if we are feeling sad or depressed, we might have thoughts like we aren't worth much of anything, and we might do behaviors like staying in bed all day. On the other hand, if we are feeling happy or excited, we might have thoughts like the future is bright, and we might do behaviors like call a friend or go see a movie.

TRACK YOUR THOUGHTS, FEELINGS, AND BEHAVIORS

If we want to be emotionally healthy, it can be helpful to get in the habit of tracking our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, especially if we are feeling down or unhappy. Sometimes when I'm feeling down, I might not have an explanation for how I'm feeling. This can be confusing! This happened to me this past weekend. I noticed that I was feeling sad, but I wasn't sure what the reason was.

However, if we can pause and identify our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, we might learn some important information that could help us moving forward. For example, this past weekend, one of the behaviors that I experienced along with my feeling of sadness was a discussion I had with my wife in which we weren't on the same page. The thoughts that came up for me were "We're so different", "She doesn't understand me", and "No one understands me." Other behaviors that happened were me being quiet and not initiating conversation with my wife.

TRACKING EXAMPLE: A FIGHT WITH MY WIFE

So, if I were keeping track of my thoughts, feelings, and behaviors over the weekend, I might write down the following:

Time:	Saturday afternoon
Thought:	We're so different. She doesn't understand me. No one understands me.
Feeling:	Sadness
Behavior:	Disagreement with wife. Being quiet and focusing on my work. Not initiating conversation with my wife.

As I continue to track and connect my thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, I can begin to get more information about what thoughts and behaviors are associated with each of my feelings. What's going on when I'm feeling Sad? Angry? Scared? Happy? Excited? Tender?

Getting this information is the first step toward making changes in our mental health.

ACTION STEP



Stop three times during your day today and write down one thought, one feeling, and one behavior you are experiencing at that time. Try to do this once in the morning, once in the afternoon, and once in the evening. Did you learn anything about yourself? What thoughts and behaviors are associated with each of your feelings?

WORKING WITH THOUGHTS

TOOL

In traditional cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), the goal is often to change your thoughts, if you feel like they are negatively impacting your life. Sometimes this can work. If I get in a fight with my wife, and have the following thoughts (e.g., We're so different, She doesn't understand me, No one understands me), I could reflect on the thought and test whether or not it is true. I might, for example, remember that there are a lot of things we DO connect on. Or I might remember that it's unrealistic to connect with a partner all the time, and the connection we do have is probably better than average. Changing these thoughts has the potential to make me feel better.

CHANGING THOUGHTS IS HARD

As more research has accumulated, however, we have found that actually changing your thoughts is pretty hard to do. The reason is that if we engage in a process of trying to change a thought, this process paradoxically involves an increased focus on the thought. For example, if I'm trying to change the thoughts (We're so different, She doesn't understand me, No one understands me), I can actually increase my focus on those thoughts, making them seem more true.

THOUGHTS ARE JUST THOUGHTS

A more effective approach is to view thoughts as just thoughts—a story that I'm making up in my brain. This story may or may not be true. To give a silly example, if I say the word "milk," it brings up all sorts of stories and meanings in my head (e.g., drinking milk, milk and cookies, cows, bad gas, strong bones, etc.). But none of these things are actually true about my life right now (e.g., I'm not drinking milk

right now), they are just a story in my head. Irrespective of the thoughts going on in my brain, I can still make choices (e.g., I can choose to drink a glass of milk, or I can choose not to drink a glass of milk).

In the same way, thoughts that cause us pain are basically stories that are happening in our head. They are based on past experiences, for sure, but they don't have to dictate or control our future. I can have the thought that my partner doesn't understand me, but I can still move forward in the relationship. The thought doesn't have to cause me to withdraw from my partner or get a divorce.

3 STEPS FOR WORKING WITH PAINFUL THOUGHTS

Here are 3 steps for working with your painful thoughts:

- 1. Build your tolerance for painful thoughts. Thoughts can be incredibly painful, but at the end of the day, they are just thoughts in your head. Thoughts don't cause actual injury like a broken bone. Although it might seem impossible, you can build your "muscle" to tolerate painful thoughts. When a painful thought comes up for you, press the pause button for a minute. Don't immediately distract yourself with something; instead, see if the thought decreases in intensity over time. Often painful thoughts are like waves on the ocean—they come and go. Build your tolerance for experiencing painful thoughts.
- 2. Defuse your thoughts and behaviors. If you fuse something together, it means you connect them permanently. Defusing is the opposite—you separate two things that are often joined together. For many individuals, thoughts and behaviors are fused together. We believe that our thoughts actually cause the things that are happening in our life. But in reality, thoughts are just thoughts. They involve electrical impulses happening in our brain. You can experience a painful thought AND move forward in the direction you want to go. One helpful strategy for defusing your thoughts is to focus on the actual words and sounds of a thought. For example, if I'm struggling with the thought: "She doesn't understand me," I might repeat the thought several times in different kinds of voices. As I do this, the sounds of the words take precedence, and the meaning or story fades into the background.

3. Move forward into valued action. One of the biggest mistakes people make is to focus too much on their painful thoughts. Remember what I said before there's a paradox here: Focusing too much on trying to get rid of your painful thoughts can actually make those thoughts more likely to come to mind! Instead of spending too much time and effort trying to control your internal experience, let it be and move forward into valued action. For example, if I'm struggling with the thought: "She doesn't understand me," it's going to be tough to just will myself to change my thought. The thought is there. Instead, I might be better off if I accept that thought AND move forward into valued action. For example, I might have a value of connecting with my wife. Even though I have this painful thought, I can still make choices to connect with her, plan a date night, ask her questions about her day, etc.

ACTION STEP



Write down a painful thought you are struggling with today. Repeat it out loud over and over again. Say it in different voices (e.g., loud, soft, yell, sing, whisper, say it like Darth Vader, rap it, etc.). See if the meaning of the thought starts to melt into the background as you focus on how the words actually sound. Then write down one valued action you have, and see if you can do that action today, irrespective of what is happening in your head.

CHANGING BEHAVIORS

TOOL

Sometimes in our life, we might realize that we are doing something that doesn't align with our values or how we want to live our life. For example, maybe one of our values is health, but we're smoking a pack of cigarettes a day and drinking too much. Or, we might realize that we are NOT doing something that does align with our values or how we want to live our life. For example, maybe one of our values is relationship, but we aren't spending much time with our spouse or kids. Either way, we want to change a behavior in our lives.

CHANGING A BEHAVIOR IS DIFFICULT

Changing a behavior is difficult. There isn't any way around it. Changing even something small like biting your nails can feel impossible. Part of the reason changing behaviors is hard is that doing something different can feel unnatural. For example, if you are feeling sad or depressed, it probably feels natural to stay in your bed all day. It probably feels unnatural to do something different—like calling a friend and making plans. Similarly, if you feel anxious about something, it probably feels natural to avoid it. It probably feels unnatural to do something different—like actually facing the thing you are afraid of.

THE 5 S'S OF BEHAVIOR CHANGE

Luckily, there are some things we can do to give ourselves the best chance at success. Here are 5 strategies to change a behavior. They are easy to remember, because they each start with the letter S:

- 1. Adjust the surroundings. Often when we think about behavior change, we think about the things we do inside us. But we often forget that our environment has a big impact on whether we will succeed or fail. Take a look at your surroundings. If something in your environment is working against your behavior change, get rid of it! For example, if you're trying to stop drinking, get rid of all the alcohol in your house. Don't hang out at the bar after work. Make your surroundings work for you, not against you.
- 2. Start small. One of the most common mistakes people make when trying to change a behavior is to start doing something that is too big. For example, maybe you want to get back into shape, so you resolve to run 5 miles. That's too much too soon! You are setting yourself up for failure. Instead, start small. Resolve to run for 5 minutes. Then build on your success. Always start with something that you know you can do, and work up from there.
- 3. Be specific. A lot of people have behavior change goals that are too vague (e.g., be healthier, have a better relationship). This makes it difficult to know what exactly you want to change. Instead, be specific about the behavior you want to change. For example, instead of trying to "be healthier," make it a goal to exercise for 30 minutes, 3 times this week. Instead of trying to "have a better relationship," make it a goal to plan a date night for your spouse this week. Be specific, so you can know whether the change was successful or not.
- 4. Schedule it in. When trying to change a behavior, write it down in your schedule. Pick a time during the day to do the behavior. It's best if you can do it at the same time every day. Your new behavior won't feel natural at first—that's okay. Schedule it in like you would an appointment on your calendar. Over time, the new behavior will become second nature. But at first, you have to schedule it in or it won't happen.
- **5. Support.** You can't change a behavior alone. You need accountability and support. Ask a friend to call you every day to check in with you about your behavior change. Better yet, partner together with a friend and make the change as a team. Go public with your behavior change on social media. Gather a community around you to help you and encourage you.

ACTION STEP



Write down one behavior that you would like to change. Then go through the 5 S's. Write down one thing you could do this week for each S. For example, what is one thing you could adjust in your surroundings to make your behavior change more likely? Is your behavior change small and manageable? If not, could you cut it down to make your initial step smaller? Is your behavior change specific? If not, could you narrow in on what exactly you would like to change this week? Did you schedule in your behavior change? If not, write down the exact date and time you will do it on your calendar. How is your support? Could you recruit at least one person to help support you in your behavior change?



UNDERSTANDING FEELINGS AND NEEDS

One of the most difficult (but important) aspects of mental health is being able to navigate your emotions. Sometimes people struggle because they experience very high levels of certain emotions (such as depression or anxiety), and don't know what to do about them. Other times, people don't know how to understand their feelings or talk about them. When this happens, we tend to stuff our emotions down, hoping they will go away.

STUFFING YOUR EMOTIONS DOESN'T WORK

Stuffing our emotions isn't a very good strategy. Part of the reason is that it doesn't really work. We might try really hard to push down our emotions, hoping they will go away, but they never really do. When we do this, our emotions tend to come out sideways. Have you ever been really angry at work, for example, but didn't know how to express your anger toward your boss in an effective way? You might have come home and yelled at your wife or kicked your dog. Suppressing your emotions is like trying to hold a beach ball underneath the water. You can try to do it, and you might even be successful for a short time, but eventually the beach ball pops out of the water, out of control.

EMOTIONS AND NEEDS

Another reason why it is important to understand your emotions and be able to talk about them is that our emotions provide information about our needs. If we can't identify and talk about our feelings, we don't know what our needs are. And if we don't know what our needs are, we can't take steps to get our needs met in an effective way. Continuing the example from above, if you are feeling angry with your boss, maybe you needed protection, or you needed to set a boundary with your work.

HOW TO IDENTIFY AND TALK ABOUT EMOTIONS

When talking about emotions, I like to use the acronym SASHET—sad, angry, scared, happy, excited, and tender.

- 1. Sadness involves feelings of loss. Maybe someone close to you passed away, and you feel loss from that. Maybe you recently got divorced, and there is loss associated with the relationship ending. Maybe you are feeling sad from the loss of a dream, or something you wanted to happen that just didn't work out. You can sometimes feel sadness as heaviness in your chest. Maybe you feel a lump in your throat. Perhaps you feel like you are about to cry.
- 2. Anger involves a boundary being crossed. Maybe someone did something or said something to you or your family that wasn't right. Maybe you were cheated in a business deal. Maybe you experienced an injustice. You can sometimes feel anger as clenching your fists. Maybe you feel tightness in your jaw. You might feel hot, or amped up.
- 3. Scare involves feeling as if you are in danger. Maybe you actually are in physical danger. Or maybe you feel fear about a task at work that you don't think you can do. Maybe you feel scare about the possibility of a relationship ending, and what that would mean for you and your family. You can sometimes feel fear as butterflies in your stomach. You might feel jittery or shaky. You might have trouble sleeping, or relaxing.
- 4. Happiness involves feelings of joy, as if everything is right with the world. Maybe you are feeling sensory pleasure, such as when you take in a beautiful sunset or eat a good meal. Maybe you feel a deep sense of satisfaction from a job well done. You can sometimes feel happiness as a deep restful satisfaction. Maybe you find yourself smiling, or having a more open posture toward the world.

- 5. Excitement involves anticipation that something good is going to happen. Maybe you are excited about a new opportunity, such as starting a new school year or beginning a new job. Maybe you are excited about an upcoming trip or vacation. You can sometimes feel excited as having a lot of energy in your body. You might have trouble sitting still, and want to jump up and down.
- 6. **Tenderness** involves deep connection with others. You might feel tender toward someone whom you love and care about. Maybe you were struggling or feeling down, and there was someone there to listen and be with you in your pain. You can sometimes feel tenderness as heaviness in your body or chest. You might experience tears because of your connection with the other person.

CONNECTING EMOTIONS TO NEEDS

Identifying how you are feeling is important, because it can give you a clue for what your needs are. After you identify your needs, you can begin to take concrete steps to meet those needs. But if you don't know what you are feeling, you might have a difficult time identifying your needs. And if you don't know your needs, it's going to be hard to meet those needs. Here are some ideas for the needs that are associated with each of the 6 main emotions:

- 1. **Sadness** involves feelings of loss. When we feel sadness, we usually need comfort.
- 2. Anger involves a boundary being crossed. When we feel anger, we usually need protection, or help setting a boundary.
- **3. Scare** involves feeling as if you are in danger. When we feel scare, we usually need affirmation or assurance.
- 4. Happiness involves feelings of joy, as if everything is right with the world. When we feel happy, our needs are being met.
- 5. Excitement involves anticipation that something good is going to happen. When we feel excited, we anticipate that our needs will be met in the future.
- 6. **Tenderness** involves deep connection with others. When we feel tender, our need for comfort is being met.

ACTION STEP



Try this exercise today. Pause for a moment and identify what you are feeling right now. Maybe there is something going on in your body that gives you a clue about what you are feeling. Then try to identify one need that is related to your feeling. If you are going through this book with a family member or friend, try saying the following, "I feel [pick the feeling that best describes you]." Then give a short context (less than 1 minute) to give the other person a sense of what is going on in your life and what need might be associated with your feeling. Then have the other person tell you what they are feeling, and give a short context for the need that is connected with their feeling.

STAY IN YOUR OWN BUSINESS

TOOL

When it comes to your mental health, one of the most important concepts to keep in mind is to stay in your own business. When I talk about "your own business," I mean that it's important to stay focused on the things in your life that you have control over. We have control over our own thoughts, feelings, and actions, but not the thoughts, feelings, and actions of other people (even those closest to us like our spouse and children). As human beings, we are also limited in our power to control certain aspects of our lives or outside events.

In her book <u>Loving What Is</u>, author Byron Katie says there are three types of business in the world:

- 1. Your business. Your business consists of everything that is happening in your own world and that you have control over, including your thoughts, your feelings, and your actions.
- 2. Someone else's business. Someone else's business consists of everything that is happening in someone else's world, including the people you are in relationship with. Their thoughts, their feelings, and their actions all fall under someone else's business.
- **3. God's business.** God's business consists of everything that doesn't fall under the umbrella of your business or someone else's business. Natural disasters, the weather, illness and disease, when you will die—this is all God's business.

THE PROBLEM WITH GETTING OUTSIDE OF MY BUSINESS

Lots of problems happen when we live outside of our own business. If I'm worried about what you should be doing or not doing, I'm in your business. I'm living outside of my own business. If I'm anxious about something like a tornado or when I will die, I'm in God's business. I'm living outside of my own business.

LIVING OUTSIDE MY BUSINESS CAUSES PAIN AND ANXIETY

Living outside of your own business causes a lot of pain and anxiety, because ultimately the only thing you have any control over is your own thoughts, feelings, and actions. That's just the way life works. If you are spending a lot of time and energy worrying about what someone else is doing, you will experience a lot of pain, but it is unlikely to actually improve your situation at all. You don't have any control over the other person.

LIVING OUTSIDE MY BUSINESS DISTRACTS FROM MY OWN WORK

Living outside of your own business also distracts you from doing your own work. When you spend a lot of time and energy in someone else's business or God's business, **by definition you are not spending as much time working on your own business.** You have a lot of control over your own peace and happiness, but to get there, you have to do your own work. This means spending time and energy in your own business, working through your issues, as well as the thoughts and beliefs that cause you pain.

ACTION STEP



For one day, take an inventory of your thoughts, feelings, and actions. Check yourself every hour on the hour. What are you focused on? Where do you spend most of your time and energy: your business, someone else's business, or God's business? What is one step you could take toward spending more of your time and energy in your own business?

THE POWER OF LIMITS

TOOL

As a rule, human beings don't like limits. Think about your own life when you were growing up. When your parents put a limit on you and told you no, what was your immediate reaction? If you're like most folks, the immediate reaction to a limit is to rebel against the limit. We want options. We want to do what we want when we want. It's natural to chafe against limits.

LIMITS ARE A REALITY

But limits are a reality of our existence as human beings. Every day we come into contact with our limits. For example, we only have 24 hours in each day. We have physical limits. We need times of rest and recovery, and if we push ourselves too hard, we get sick or injured. We have emotional limits. We can only tolerate a certain level of stress before we start to develop emotional problems and stress-related disorders.

4 KEY BENEFITS TO LIMITS

Although we often resist the limits in our lives, there are benefits to living a life with limits. Here are 4 key benefits to living a life with limits:

1. Increased peace. There is a limit to the things we have control over in our lives. As we discussed in Tool #6, life works better when we stay focused on our own business—the things in our life that are inside our control. Living our life according to this limit enables us to experience higher levels of peace and lower levels of anxiety.

- 2. Increased happiness. We often buy into the lie that "more is better." We live in a culture that encourages us to spend more, eat more, and consume more. This emphasis on more has left us unhappy and struggling, often living outside our limits and ending up in debt (or worse). Also, for many activities in life, there is a "happiness cliff." More is better, but only up to a point. After this point, increased investment is associated with less happiness. Living our life according to this limit allows us to experience higher levels of happiness and well-being.
- 3. Increased focus and productivity. In our work (as in other areas of life), we often chafe against our limits. But limits can actually improve our productivity and success. Limits allow us to say no to activities that are outside our true purpose, so we can emphatically say yes to the activities that are central to our mission. Living our life according to this limit can take us to new levels of focus and productivity.
- 4. **Improved relationships.** It is impossible to control the activities of another person. For example, if we try to control our spouse or kids, this is likely to be a losing battle and end in frustration. By having healthy limits and boundaries in our relationships, we take responsibility for our part, and let others take responsibility for their part. Living our life according to these limits improves the health and satisfaction of our relationships.

3 KEY SHIFTS TO ESTABLISH LIMITS

Although living a life of limits is good for us, setting limits in our lives is hard. Here are 3 key shifts to make in order to implement limits in your life.

1. Change how you relate to limits. As previously discussed, our natural reaction when given a limit is to rebel. No wonder we struggle to implement limits in our lives. The first key shift is to change how you relate to limits. We need to start thinking about limits as something that is good for us rather than something that is holding us back. One important factor is that limits need to be freely chosen. Implement limits that push you forward toward your most important goals, and then note positive impact that limits have in your life.

- 2. Drop the pressure to align with someone's agenda. Many people feel a high degree of pressure to do it all. There can be a social pressure to align your life with how other people want you to live. This pressure can feel especially intense when it comes from a family or religious source. We experience pressure to sacrifice our own wants and needs for the wants and needs of someone else. There are elements of sacrifice that are emotionally healthy, but when the sacrifice is excessive or coerced, emotional problems can develop. Let go of the pressure to align with someone else's agenda. Instead, chart your own path and spend your energy where you want.
- 3. Give yourself the freedom to say no. Saying no is difficult. As human beings, our wants and needs don't always align completely with the wants and needs of others. When this happens, we experience conflict. Holding true to our own wants and needs sometimes involves saying no. This can be difficult to do, especially if we shy away from conflict. Start practicing and improve your "muscle" for saying no. When someone asks you to do something that isn't good for you or outside your limit, say no! Notice what comes up for you when you set a limit.

ACTION STEP

Use the acronym SPIES to think about the main aspects of your life:

- 1. Social. Your relationships with family, friends, and co-workers.
- 2. **Physical.** Your physical health and well-being (e.g., diet, exercise, sleep, health problems).
- 3. Intellectual. Your intellectual pursuits (e.g., job, school, reading, learning).
- 4. Emotional. Your emotional health (e.g., level of well-being, sense of meaning and purpose, depression, anxiety).
- 5. Spiritual. Your relationship with God and involvement in a faith community.



Pick one area where you feel like you are struggling with a limit. Spend some time to think and journal about this area. In what way do you feel like you are crossing a limit? What is a limit in this area that you think would be healthy for you? Which of the 3 key shifts do you struggle with the most in regard to limits? What is one step you could take toward establishing a limit in this area of your life?

TOOL #8 SOLVING PROBLEMS

One of the biggest areas of life involves solving problems. Most of us think about problems as if they were a bad thing. We don't like problems. We wish they would go away. But if we are open to thinking about them differently, problems are actually an opportunity. Problems are an opportunity to learn more about ourselves and the world. Some of the biggest breakthroughs and success stories happen when someone solves a big problem. So, try to think about your problems as an opportunity for growth and success, rather than something you just want to disappear.

How can we work to solve the big problems in our life? Here is a 3-step process for solving each problem that you face in life.

STEP 1: Determine whether your problem is internal or external

The first step to solving a problem is to determine whether your problem is internal or external. Internal problems are problems that happen inside you, and have to do with your own issues and hang-ups. External problems are problems that happen outside of you. They are things you need to solve, but they aren't related to your own issues.

Sometimes this distinction can be a little tricky, so let's start with a couple of examples. Let's suppose you are driving your car down the highway, and you get a flat tire. This is an external problem. It's something you have to deal with, but it isn't related to your own issues.

Here's another example: Let's say you want to have a romantic relationship, but you're really anxious about it, so you fail to take the initiative to meet new people, and the result is that you never go on any dates. Your anxiety is related to your own issues, so it's an internal problem.

Sometimes we might think a problem is an external problem when it is really an internal problem in disguise. Let's revisit the two examples. Let's say you get a flat tire on the road, but you're too embarrassed to call someone for help because you think that as a man, you should know how to fix a flat tire yourself. So, you sit on the side of the road for two hours. Here you experienced an external problem (i.e., flat tire) but it triggered an internal problem (i.e., belief that you aren't a real man).

Or let's say you don't have any dates, but in your mind, you blame your lack of dates on the fact that there aren't any available singles in your area. Here you might be masking an internal problem (e.g., anxiety or fear of rejection) by blaming an external situation.

Bottom line: Make sure you are honest with yourself about whether your problem is internal or external. Be on the lookout for internal problems that are lurking in the shadows, disguised as external problems.

STEP 2: How to solve external problems

External problems are usually easier to solve than internal problems. Here is a basic 2-step process to solve an external problem in your life.

1. If you know how to solve the problem, take action and do it. If you have the knowledge and skills to solve the external problem in your life, take action and do it. If you have a flat tire, take the spare tire and tools out of your trunk and get to work. If you want to date more, meet new people, join a dating service, and start reaching out. If you want to be healthier, join a gym and exercise regularly. Take action in the direction of your goal.

2. If you don't know how to solve the problem, get the help you need. Sometimes we don't know how to solve the problem we are facing. If you find yourself in this situation, the next step is to reach out and get the help you need. Buy a book, get a coach, or start going to counseling. For example, if you don't know how to change your flat tire, call a tow truck or a friend who knows how to do it, and get them to help you. If you aren't sure how to date more, get a dating coach or start going to counseling. If you aren't sure what to do in the gym, hire a personal trainer. There's no shame in not knowing how to do something—get in touch with someone who can show you the way.

For most external problems, this two-step process works great. If you know what to do, take action and get going! If you don't know what to do, get the help you need. Sometimes, however, this two-step process doesn't work so well. If this process doesn't work for you, there's a good chance there is an internal problem going on. For example, if you don't know how to change your tire, but can't seem to call the tow truck or a friend, there's probably something internal going on. If you hire a dating coach, but can't seem to follow his advice or homework, there's probably something going on underneath the surface. If you know you need to exercise 3 times per week, but something always comes up that keeps you from your commitment, there's probably an internal problem lurking underneath the surface.

STEP 3: How to solve internal problems

Internal problems are trickier than external problems, because there is usually something about ourselves that is getting in the way of us solving our problem. Sometimes there is a limiting thought or belief (e.g., I can't do it, I'm worthless) that gets in the way of our goal. Sometimes we tell a story about ourselves that gets in the way of us solving our problem (e.g., I'm not a very intelligent person, I'm unlovable). Here is a 3-step process for solving internal problems.

1. Identify the limiting thought or feeling. The first step is to take stock and identify the thought or feeling that is getting in the way of you solving your problem. For example, if you're struggling to call a friend for help with the flat tire, the limiting thought might be "I'm not a real man if I need help

fixing a tire." If you're having trouble reaching out to a woman for a date, the limiting feeling might be anxiety or fear of rejection. If you're struggling to be consistent with your exercise, the limiting feeling might be the discomfort from exercising.

- 2. Work to accept the limiting thought or feeling. Some people encourage trying to change the limiting thought or feeling, but I think it's pretty difficult to change a thought or feeling. Thoughts, beliefs, and feelings are usually based in past experiences, so they're hard to change without having a new or different experience. Also, paradoxically, sometimes the process of trying to change a thought or feeling backfires, and makes the thought or feeling stronger. A better strategy is to see if you can accept the uncomfortable thought or feeling. Could you notice the thought or feeling, and just accept it? Could you see the thought or feeling for what it is—a story you are telling yourself about your experiences? The thought or feeling won't last forever. But right now, it's here, whether we want it here or not. Practice improving your "muscle" for accepting unpleasant thoughts and feelings.
- 3. Engage in action consistent with your values. If you accept your limiting thought or feeling as just that—a thought or feeling, you will recognize that it doesn't have to dictate your future actions. You can experience the unpleasant thought or feeling AND engage in action consistent with your values. For example, if you're struggling with the flat tire, can you accept the thought: "I'm not a real man if I need help fixing a tire" AND call the tow truck or friend to get the help you need? If you're having trouble reaching out to a woman on a date, can you accept the feelings of anxiety or fear of rejection AND make the phone call anyways? If you're having trouble being consistent with your exercise, could you sit with the discomfort that comes from exercising when you're out of shape AND go to the gym anyways?

ACTION STEP

	F
\square	
\boxdot	Ĥ

Identify one problem that you are experiencing in your life. Walk through the steps. Is the problem internal or external? If the problem is external, go through the 2-step process for solving external problems and see if that works. If the problem is internal, go through the 3-step process for solving internal problems.

ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

TOOL

In this section, I'd like to talk about two very common types of internal problems anxiety and depression. It is likely that over the course of your life, you will struggle to some extent with one of these issues. Because of this, it's important to understand the basics of each of these mental health problems, and have a sense of what to do about them.

UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY

At its core, anxiety is about fear. Fear is actually an adaptive emotion and we need it in our lives. When we are in a dangerous situation, fear heightens our senses and gets our body ready for action. When you face danger, you need to be all systems go in order to keep you and your loved ones safe.

The problem with anxiety is that we can experience fear in situations that aren't actually dangerous, or our level anxiety can be out of proportion to reality of the situation. When this happens, our anxiety can hold us back from living the life we want to live. For example, a fear of flying might hold us back from visiting family and friends. A fear of rejection might hold us back from engaging in a romantic relationship. And so on.

DEALING WITH ANXIETY

Here is a 3-step process for dealing with unwanted anxiety in your life. Notice that the focus here isn't on reducing anxiety per se, although that might happen as a result of this process. It is very difficult to "will yourself" to change an unwanted thought or feeling such as anxiety. Instead, a better way forward is to notice and accept your thoughts and feelings, but move forward in the direction of your values anyways.

- 1. Accept your anxiety. The first step is to accept your thoughts and feelings that have to do with anxiety. Remember, when people spend a lot of energy trying to stop their anxiety, this plan often backfires. It doesn't usually work, and then this is something new to feel anxious about. Instead, accept your anxious thoughts and feelings. See if you can hold them, even though the sensations are unpleasant. See them for what they are—just thoughts happening in your brain or sensations in your body. Sit with them for a bit and see what happens. Often anxious thoughts and feelings and feelings ebb and flow over time.
- 2. Identify your values. The second step is to identify your values in this particular situation. What is it that you want for yourself? What direction do you want to take? Where do you want to be heading right now? For example, if you are feeling anxious about reaching out and asking a woman on a date, the value might be putting yourself in the position to have a romantic relationship, courage, or vulnerability. Get clear about your values and what you want.
- 3. Take action in line with your values. The third step is to engage in actions that line up with your values. Often this action takes the form of exposure, or putting yourself in contact with the thing you are feeling anxious about. But it's important to note that you aren't just doing exposure for exposure's sake. Exposure can be difficult and unpleasant, so you need a deeper motivation. The exposure is done in service of your values. For example, you pick up the phone and dial the number of the woman you are interested in SO THAT you can put yourself in position to have the romantic relationship you want. When taking action, keep these two keys in mind:
 - a. Start small. Don't bite off more than you can chew. Start with small steps in the direction of your value. For example, if you want to move in the direction of a romantic relationship, don't set out to call 30 women in a week. That's too big of a step, and you aren't likely to be successful. Instead, try making one phone call, and see how that goes.
 - **b. Be consistent.** Small changes done consistently over time lead to success. Try to do one thing every day that is in line with the value you are trying to develop. Habits are built slowly over time. Continuing the example from above, try doing one thing each day that involves reaching out to a potential romantic partner.

UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION

At its core, depression is about sadness. Like fear, sadness is also an adaptive emotion and we need it in our lives. When we experience loss, it is natural to feel sadness. Sadness lets us know that something important to us was lost, and it helps us connect vulnerably with others.

The problem with depression is that we can get stuck in our sadness, or we can begin to view ourselves, other people, and the world with an overly negative (rather than balanced) lens. When this happens, our depression can hold us back from living the live we want to live. Our activity level may decrease, and we may not engage in our work, activities, or relationships.

DEALING WITH DEPRESSION

Here is a 3-step process for dealing with depression in your life. Again, notice that the focus here isn't on just reducing depression, although that may happen as a result of this process. Similar to anxiety, it is difficult to "will yourself" to be less depressed. Instead, a better way forward is to notice and accept your thoughts and feelings, but move forward in the direction of your values.

- 1. Accept your depression. The first step is to accept your thoughts and feelings that have to do with depression. See if you can hold your thoughts and feelings of sadness and depression, even though the sensations are unpleasant. See them for what they are—just thoughts happening in your brain or sensations in your body. Sit with them for a bit and see what happens. Often depressive thoughts and feelings ebb and flow over time.
- 2. Identify your values. The second step is to identify your values in this particular situation. What is it that you want for yourself? What direction do you want to take? Where do you want to be heading right now? For example, you may have a value about being a hard worker, engaging in activities you are passionate about, taking care of your family, or learning new things. Get clear about your values and what you want.
- **3.** Take action in line with your values. The third step is to engage in actions that line up with your values. Often this action takes the form of behavioral

activation, or doing something even though you don't feel like it. Again, it is very difficult to "will yourself" to feel better. However, research has shown that when we begin to engage in activities, our thoughts and feelings tend to follow suit. In other words, if you are feeling depressed and lying in bed, the important thing isn't to try and feel less depressed so you can get out of bed. The key is to get out of bed, period. As you take action in the direction of your values, your feelings are likely to follow.

ACTION STEP



Are you struggling with anxiety or depression? When you do struggle, where does your struggle tend to be? For the problem that is most pressing right now, see if you can walk through the three steps of (1) acceptance, (2) identify values, and (3) take action in line with values. What came up for you as you did this exercise? What can you take with you moving forward?



Most of us want to be self-sufficient and handle our problems on our own, but the reality is that sometimes we need more help. Luckily, there are plenty of trained psychologists, counselors, and social workers who can help us when we need it. Here are some guidelines for when you might need more help.

6 SIGNS YOU MIGHT NEED MORE HELP

- 1. You feel stuck. If you've been working on a problem for a long time, but you haven't seen any movement lately, it's a good sign that you're stuck and might need more help.
- 2. You're struggling with the basics. If you're having a tough time getting out of bed, going to work/school, or engaging with friends and family, it's a signal that you might need more help.
- 3. Your problem is getting worse. If your issue is trending in the wrong direction (i.e., it seems to be getting worse rather than better), it might be time to get more help.
- 4. Your friends and family are concerned. Your family and friends are the people who know you best. If your friends and family express concern and think you should get more help, it might be good to listen to them.
- **5.** You have thoughts of hurting yourself or others. If you have thoughts about hurting yourself or someone else, this is a sign that you need more help. If you or someone else is in immediate danger, call 911 and get help immediately.

6. You are drinking alcohol more than average, or using substances. Many people use drugs and alcohol to cope with pain. If you see an uptick in your alcohol and drug use, it might be a sign you need more help.

Many people need more help, but not everyone takes the initiative to get it. How come? Here are some common barriers to getting more help.

3 BARRIERS TO GETTING MORE HELP

- 1. Stigma. Some people have a negative attitude about going to counseling. Counseling might be seen as only for "people who are really crazy." Some families, cultures, or religious groups might also have negative views toward counseling. Thankfully, attitudes toward counseling are becoming more positive. Lots of people go to counseling to deal with all sorts of problems. I went to counseling for several years, and it was a real game-changer for me. Try to drop the stigma if you can. You're taking responsibility for getting the help you need—that's a good thing.
- 2. Cost. Some people balk at the cost of counseling. While it's true that some counselors are expensive, others are more affordable and implement a sliding scale based on your income. Other counselors take insurance, which can make it more affordable. There are other options that can be very inexpensive (e.g., going to a clinic that is run by a local university). Don't let cost be a barrier to getting the help you need—find an option that works in your budget.
- **3. Bad experience.** A big part of having a successful counseling experience is your relationship with your counselor. Unfortunately, like any field, some counselors are better than others. Also, because each person is different, you will connect with some counselors and not with others. Don't let one bad experience turn you off from counseling as a whole. Keep trying until you find a counselor that you connect with.

Once you decide that you want to get more help, how do you pick a counselor? What should you be looking for? If you live in a rural community, you might not have many options. But if you live in a big city, there are probably hundreds of counselors to choose from. How can you pick the counselor that is right for you?

3 KEY QUESTIONS WHEN CHOOSING A COUNSELOR

- 1. Is the counselor licensed? What is their level of education? It's usually a good idea to look for a licensed psychologist, counselor, or social worker. In order to get licensed, counselors have to go through a masters or doctoral program, take a bunch of counseling classes, pass qualifying exams, and have a certain number of supervised clinical hours. If a counselor is licensed, you know that they have at least a baseline level of education and experience. It doesn't necessarily mean they are a good counselor, or that they are the right counselor for you, but it's a good place to start.
- 2. Does the counselor have experience in your presenting problem? A second question to consider is whether the counselor has experience treating the problem you are dealing with. For example, if you are struggling with an eating disorder, does the counselor have training and experience treating clients with eating disorders? If you want counseling to help your marriage, does the counselor have training and experience counseling couples? It's okay to ask these questions when looking for a counselor. A licensed counselor is ethically required to operate within their competence. This means that if they don't feel like they have the necessary training and experience to treat your problem, they are required to say that and refer you to someone who can.
- 3. How is the working alliance? The working alliance is a fancy term for the quality of the relationship between the counselor and client. It has three main parts: (1) bond (i.e., how close do you feel to your counselor?), (2) goals (i.e., do you agree on what you are trying to accomplish in counseling?), and (3) tasks (i.e., do you agree on what you should be doing in the counseling session?). The working alliance is one of the strongest predictors of improvement and satisfaction in counseling. If you don't feel a connection with a counselor, they might not be the right one for you.

Don't be afraid to interview a few counselors to find someone you connect with. In regular life, you won't connect with each person you meet. Similarly, in counseling, you won't feel a connection with every counselor. If something doesn't feel right, that's okay, try out a different counselor and see if there is a better connection.

ACTION STEP



Be honest and self-reflect on where you are at right now. Could you use more help in dealing with the problems in your life? Did you notice any of the 6 signs present in your own life right now? If so, what holds you back from getting more help? Could you take a step of courage and get the help you need? What do you think of the three key questions for choosing a counselor? Has it been difficult or easy to find a counselor that you connect with? What other key questions do you think are important when choosing a counselor?



WORKING THROUGH YOUR FAMILY AND PAST

We are often haunted by our family and our past. Sometimes there is an explicit connection between something we experienced long ago and our current struggles. For example, maybe we were abused or neglected by our parents, and now we struggle with trust and developing healthy romantic relationships. Or maybe we were overseas in a war and experienced terrible things. Now we have difficulty relaxing and integrating back into normal life.

Other times, we might not see a clear connection between our family, past, and current problems, but we have a sense that we didn't get all our needs met growing up. Maybe we needed affirmation from our parents, but received criticism instead. Today we might carry around a critical voice in our head, which keeps us from doing the things we want and need to do.

DON'T GET STUCK IN THE PAST

I think there is some utility to talking about our family and past, but it's easy to get stuck there. The tough reality is that we can't change our history. What has happened, has happened. We can't go back in time and change the events of our past, no matter how much we might want to.

But even though we can't change our family or our past, they can still influence us. For example, we often carry around messages that started in our growing up years. If we were abused, for example, we might still tell ourselves a story that we are worthless, even if our abusers are dead and gone.

We also tend to develop patterns of behavior early on that continue throughout our lives. These behaviors might have been adaptive and protected us growing up, but now they may have outlived their utility. For example, if our caregivers were inconsistent and we didn't have enough food growing up, we might have gobbled up every scrap of food that came our way. That pattern of behavior allowed us to survive, but now we eat too much and our hoarding tendencies are damaging our marriage.

COMING TO PEACE WITH OUR FAMILY AND PAST

Here is a 5-step process that can help you come to peace with your family and your past:

- 1. Identify the problematic thought or behavior. The first step is to identify the problematic thought or behavior that you believe is linked to your family upbringing or your past. It's better if the thought or behavior is very specific. Try to identify the thought or behavior that is causing you the most pain. For example, one thought that has been difficult for me over the years is "I have to be perfect."
- 2. Understand the link to your family or past. The second step is to understand the link between your problematic thought/behavior and your family/past. Do you notice anything about your family upbringing or past that you can link to the problematic thought or behavior? For example, my mom's family is very intense, successful, and achievement-oriented. My grandparents were successful in business, and my uncle was a football star who played for the Minnesota Vikings. The expectation was that I would succeed at a high level in my activities as well.
- 3. Honor the little child inside you. Picture the little child that was you, growing up in your family. That little child was doing the best they could. They were trying to make it in a difficult environment. They were doing what they could to survive. The message they started to tell themselves was all they knew. The pattern of behavior they developed allowed them to get you to where you are today. Honor the little child inside you for doing what they needed to do to survive. For example, I could honor the little boy inside me who tried so hard to succeed. He just wanted to be loved and accepted, and he was doing the best he could.
- 4. Practice compassion toward the little child inside you. When we identify a part of ourselves that we don't like, we can be very critical or angry toward that part. After honoring the little child inside you, the next step is
compassion. Can you feel genuine care and love toward that part of yourself? If you struggle to do this, think about how you would respond if you found your child (or your friend's child, if you don't have kids) in this state. What would you be drawn to say and do? Exercise your compassion muscle toward the little child inside you. For example, I felt tender toward the little boy inside me who was trying so hard. He just wanted to know deep down that he was good enough. I wanted to put my arm around him and let him know that everything was going to be alright.

5. The future is open. Sometimes a message that we tell ourselves is so strong, it can seem like the message itself causes us to live our life in a certain way. Or the pattern of behavior can seem so ingrained, it can almost seem as if the behavior happens automatically. But this isn't necessarily true. We do have control over our actions and behaviors. For example, even though I have a thought that says, "I have to be perfect," I can choose to turn in a paper that is just good enough. The future isn't determined for us—we can still make different choices and get different results.

DON'T WASTE THE PRESENT

Our family and past are powerful determinants of our current thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. But they aren't the end all be all. It can be helpful to understand how our family upbringing and past behaviors influence us, but don't spend too much time in the past. Some people spend their entire lives trying to "figure out" the past and forget that life is lived right now, in the present. We have the freedom to make choices today, irrespective of our family upbringing and past experiences. This is an awesome privilege—don't waste it.

ACTION STEP



Spend some time thinking and journaling about your most problematic thought or pattern of behavior. Take some time and go through the 5 steps for coming to peace with your family and past. Take your time at each step, and make a note of what comes up for you. But also realize that your life is lived right now. Feel free to make a different choice today and see if you get a different result.

CONNECTING WITH OTHERS

DOL

At a deep, foundational level, we have a need to connect with others. Loneliness is one of the most painful things we can experience. Almost all of us has a need and desire to be part of a family and community. We long to love others and be loved in return.

But for some of us, it's difficult to connect with others. Maybe our parents were a bit awkward, and we didn't learn basic social skills as well as we could have growing up. Or maybe we were into different or unique things in school, and had trouble finding common ground with our peers. Perhaps we had something that was different about us, and we had difficulty fitting in. At some level, we could all use some work connecting with others. How can we develop and deepen our relationships?

5 KEYS TO CONNECTING WITH PEOPLE

- 1. Time. Relationships take time to develop. It is rare that a relationship develops overnight. Because of this, if you want to develop a relationship with someone, you have to put in the time. Sometimes we think we can avoid this point. Maybe you're a parent but you're really busy with work, so you rarely get to spend time with your kids. You might think you can "make up" for the lack of time by purchasing them a fancy gift or taking them on a nice vacation once a year, but you're setting yourself up for failure. Bite the bullet and put in the time. If you want to develop friendships or get to know someone in a deeper way, put in the time. Hang out, be available, and put in the hours. You will likely find that the friendship develops naturally as you put in the time.
- 2. **Proximity.** We tend to develop closer friendships with people who live nearby. There's something about being close and available that contributes to a developing relationship. If you want a lot of friends, don't live in the boonies

all by yourself. Live in an area that's nearby the people you want to develop relationships with. If you want to connect with people at your university, for example, live on campus. If you want to connect with people who go to your church or gym, live near your church or gym. Let the law of proximity work for you.

- **3. Common ground.** We tend to develop relationships with others who are similar to us, or share common ground. When we have common ground, there's space to connect. If you want to develop a relationship with someone, think about the things you have in common. Another great strategy is to think about the activities you like to do, and join a group or organization that does that activity. By doing this, you are likely to meet other people who are interested in the same activity you are. If you are meeting someone new, you can work to create a common ground. Common ground can come from anywhere. Is it cold outside? Talk about the weather. Is the person wearing a hat from a sports team you like? Connect on how well (or poorly) the season is going. And so on.
- 4. Vulnerability and self-disclosure. Relationships develop as both parties share vulnerably about themselves. There is a dance to vulnerability and self-disclosure. At first, people share a little bit about themselves. Little by little, as they feel safe, people tend to deepen their level of self-disclosure and share more vulnerably. If you want to connect and develop relationships with others, you have to enter into this dance. Take a risk and share something about yourself. See if your relationship partner reciprocates. As the conversation progresses, take more risks and deepen your level of vulnerability. Keep engaging in this process over time, and you will develop a close friendship.
- 5. Openness and curiosity. When you connect with others, try to engage with openness and curiosity. Our natural tendency is to judge others who are different from ourselves. Try to counteract this natural tendency by being open and curious in your interactions with others. Treat every interaction as an opportunity to learn something new about yourself and the other person. If someone is from a different culture or country, for example, ask questions and learn everything you can about that person's background. If someone has a different job from you, be curious and learn about their field. People love talking about themselves and sharing their stories. By engaging with openness and curiosity, you give them an opportunity to do just that.

ACTION STEP



How satisfied are you in your relationships right now? If you feel like you need more relationships, what is one step you could take to put yourself in contexts where you are meeting new people and increasing the possibility of developing new relationships? Is there someone who is an acquaintance right now that you could reach out to and try to deepen the relationship? Which of the 5 keys to connecting with people could you take and apply to your life right now?



Boundaries are important to developing and maintaining healthy relationships. But what are boundaries, and how can we work to develop better boundaries in our relationships?

WHAT ARE BOUNDARIES?

Boundaries are like invisible property lines in a relationship. Boundaries distinguish between what is your responsibility and what the responsibility of the other person. Having good boundaries allows you to take 100% responsibility for the things in life that you are responsible for, and also gives you the freedom to let others take 100% responsibility for the things they are responsible for.

AN EXAMPLE OF BAD BOUNDARIES

In his book **Boundaries**, Henry Cloud gives an example of a father that came to him with a problem. He wanted his adult son to take responsibility for his life, but his son just wouldn't do it. Instead of getting his degree and getting a job, his son seemed to be content wasting his life hanging out with his friends and partying.

Interestingly, Cloud didn't focus on the son. Cloud didn't even think the son had a problem. The son wasn't in Cloud's office, paying him \$100/hour. Cloud said the problem had to do with the father's boundaries. How could the son spend all his time hanging out and partying if he didn't have a job? The answer was that the father always bailed him out financially. The father wasn't clear about what was his responsibility and what was his son's responsibility, and because of this, he enabled his son's irresponsible behavior.

CREATING AND MAINTAINING BOUNDARIES

How can we work to create and maintain boundaries in our relationships? Here are 5 keys to living a life with boundaries.

- 1. Get clear on your business. A starting point for living a life with boundaries is to get crystal clear on what is your responsibility, and what is not your responsibility. Author Byron Katie says there are 3 types of business: my business, another person's business, and God's business. My business consists of everything that is under my control—basically my own thoughts, feelings, and actions. Another person's business consists of their thoughts, feelings, and actions. God's business consists of everything else—the path of the hurricane, when I'm going to die, etc. To create good boundaries, you have to know what falls under your business—and what doesn't.
- 2. Focus most of your time and energy on your business. You are only in control of your own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. You have almost no power to change another person. So why spend a lot of time and energy worrying about their life? A key aspect of living a life with boundaries is to spend the vast majority of your time and energy in your own business. When you do this, you also let the other people in your life take care of their business—you aren't intruding or trying to control their behavior.
- **3. Go ahead and help, but don't expect anything in return.** It's good to help others in need. So, go ahead, help others as much as you want. The problem comes when we help and then expect something in return. Conditional help is a relationship killer. For example, a father might help his kid who is having money problems by giving him ten thousand dollars. If the father is okay giving freely and expecting nothing in return, that's fine. But if the father gives the money and then expects his child to be thankful, turn his life around, and get his act together... now the father is in his kid's business. The father is not keeping a good boundary, and his relationship is likely to suffer.
- 4. Experience consequences and let other people experience consequences. In regular life, our actions have consequences. If we are disciplined and work hard, for example, we experience a reward. If we are lazy and don't put in the work, we experience a punishment. For most people, the reinforcement system that the world has set up works. We try certain actions, and then we experience a reward or punishment. Depending

on the consequences, we adjust our behavior accordingly. Learning from consequences is an important part of what it means to be an adult. But when we have bad boundaries, we either (a) don't experience our own consequences or (b) don't let other people experience their own consequences. In both of these scenarios, proper learning doesn't take place. Instead of protecting people from their consequences (which doesn't help them in the long run), deal with the consequences of your own actions and let others deal with the consequences of their actions.

5. Get comfortable with discomfort. Part of the reason we struggle to maintain boundaries in our lives is because we struggle to deal with the normal discomfort that comes from living a normal life. If we do something that goes against our values, we generally feel guilty or experience a negative consequence. This can make us feel bad, so our response might be to try to get someone else to take responsibility for us so we don't have to feel bad anymore. But this move undercuts the learning process—it isn't good for us in the long run. Similarly, we can also feel discomfort from the pain of others. But if we cross a boundary and do something to take away their pain, we undercut their learning process—it isn't good for that person in the long run. But to stay in our own business, we have to get comfortable with discomfort.

ACTION STEP



Take stock of the relationships in your life. How are your boundaries with your family, friends, and co-workers? Do you have a clear sense of what falls within your realm of responsibility, and what doesn't? What is one step you could take to develop and maintain boundaries in your life?



One of the key skills to develop if you want better relationships is communication. Communication is foundational to healthy relationships. In a way, it's the building blocks for relationships—good communication skills help you to do all of the other important "stuff" that happens in relationship (e.g., get to know one another, solve problems, resolve conflict). There are 4 key aspects of good communication: (1) the nature of a good conversation, (2) self-disclosure, (3) asking good questions, and (4) listening well.

THE NATURE OF A GOOD CONVERSATION

A good conversation is like a dance between two partners. When things are flowing well, there is a give and take that happens naturally. The conversation goes back and forth, back and forth, and the two discussion partners begin to feel more and more connected as the conversation goes on.

When having a conversation, balance is key. There are two pitfalls on either side talking too much and not talking enough. When having a conversation, try to balance speaking and listening. Don't dominate the conversation, but don't just sit there silently either—respond to your conversation partner.

One metaphor that is helpful for me when thinking about a good conversation is a tennis match. When you're playing tennis for fun, you hit the ball over the net, and then your partner hits the ball back. This goes on for a while, until the play is over. Then one of you starts again and hits a new ball over the net.

A good conversation is like a friendly game of tennis. One of you starts the conversation by asking a question or starting a discussion on a particular topic. You send the conversation over to your partner, who shares a thought or story, and then they send the conversation back your way, perhaps by asking a question. This goes back and forth, back and forth, until one of you starts a new topic (i.e., serves a new ball).

If you keep the tennis ball on your side of the net (i.e., dominate the conversation), the game isn't very fun. Likewise, if you don't hit the ball back to your partner (i.e., sit silently), your partner has to keep hitting balls to your side of the net (i.e., starting new topics or asking more questions), and eventually they will run out of balls. The key is balance—strive for an easy back and forth.

SELF-DISCLOSURE

Self-disclosure involves sharing things about yourself, such as stories from your past, or your current activities, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and attitudes. Self-disclosure is important because it lets the other person into your world. Self-disclosure leads to intimacy. If you want to develop a close relationship with someone, you have to be willing to disclose things about yourself.

Here are 3 key tips to keep in mind about self-disclosure:

- 1. Slow and steady wins the race. If you meet someone and tell them your deepest and darkest secret right off the bat, this might come across as off-putting. Instead, ease into self-disclosure. Start small, and then slowly increase your level of self-disclosure over time as the relationship develops.
- 2. Match the pace of your partner. Self-disclosure works best when it is mirrored by your conversation partner. You self-disclose a little bit, which invites your partner to self-disclose a little bit. Their self-disclosure invites you to self-disclose a little more, which in turn invites your partner to self-disclose at a deeper level. And around it goes. But if your level of self-disclosure doesn't match your partner, the conversation can feel one-sided.
- **3. Self-disclosure is a risk.** There is always the chance that you may selfdisclose, and your partner may not reciprocate. Or they may judge you or even reject you for something you shared. Vulnerability is always a risk. It's part of the relationship game. But the alternative is to never open yourself up to another person, which is worse. Face the fear that comes with vulnerability, and self-disclose anyway.

ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS

People love to talk about themselves. It feels nice to know someone is interested in your life. That is why an important aspect of effective communication involves learning how to ask good questions.

The first key point about asking good questions is motivation. The good questionasker has an other-oriented motivation. He is curious and genuinely wants to learn and understand more about the person he is in conversation with. She doesn't just ask a question and then hope the other person will reciprocate with a question; she truly listens and asks follow-up questions to learn more.

The second key point about asking good questions is that it is more effective to ask open-ended questions that can invite deeper reflection and sharing. A closedended question can be answered with a yes or a no (e.g., "Did you like the movie?"). An open-ended question, on the other hand, invites the respondent to describe or explain (e.g., "What did you think about the movie?"). Can you see how an open-ended question would help you get to know the person on a deeper level? Whenever possible, ask open-ended questions rather than closed-ended questions.

LISTENING WELL

Listening is a difficult skill to master. I'm a licensed psychologist, and even I sometimes struggle to listen well. Even though listening can be difficult, there are some foundational skills we can work to improve our listening. Here are 5 steps that can help you become a better listener. They can be remembered by the acronym SOLER:

- 1. Sit squarely. When listening, sit squarely toward the person you are listening to. Don't turn away from the speaker; instead, directly face them.
- 2. **Open posture.** Have an open posture. Don't sit with your arms crossed, and don't sit hunched over in a ball. Open your arms and hands toward the person you are listening to.
- **3.** Lean in. Lean in toward the person who is speaking, which communicates interest. Don't lean back or away, which can communicate disinterest.

- **4. Eye contact.** Make eye contact with the person who is speaking. Don't close your eyes or look away.
- 5. **Relax.** Take a few deep breaths and relax while you are listening. Don't tense up, which can make it difficult to focus on the speaker.

ACTION STEP



Take some time and practice the four key aspects to good communication. Try focusing on one aspect per day. For example, during one whole day, focus on asking open-ended questions and see what happens. Another day, focus on listening well with SOLER and see what happens. Check in with the people you are in relationship with. What parts of communication are you good at? What aspects of communication could you improve on?



Conflict in a relationship can be difficult to deal with. Sometimes it can feel impossible. I want to talk about 2 key aspects of handling conflict: (1) what to do when you are triggered and (2) look for the need-need.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU ARE TRIGGERED

Sometimes when we are in the midst of a conflict, it's tough to stay calm and think straight because we are triggered. You probably know the feeling well. Someone says or does something that offends you. Your pulse quickens, your blood pressure rises, and you tense up. The fight or flight response kicks in and you REACT! Maybe you yell, shout, or respond with a cutting remark. Perhaps you type out an angry retort on social media and press "send" without fully thinking it through.

When we are triggered, it is difficult (if not impossible) to work through conflict effectively. How can we respond more effectively when we are triggered? Here are 4 steps that have helped me to respond thoughtfully when I am triggered.

- 1. Press pause on your response. When you are triggered, it is difficult to respond effectively. Usually what happens is you respond in anger or frustration, which escalates the situation. The chances of having a fruitful interaction in the midst of a trigger reaction are almost zero. So, the first thing I try to do is press pause on my response. Make it a rule that you won't respond right away when you are triggered. Pressing the pause button is always a good first step.
- 2. Regulate your physiological response. After you have pressed the pause button on your response, the second step is to regulate your physiological response. When you are triggered, your body experiences physical sensations (e.g., heart rate increases, muscles tense, etc.). It's tough to respond effectively

(or even think clearly) when your body is so hyped up. It's a good idea to utilize coping skills to calm down. For example, try to control your breathing. Breathe in for two seconds, hold your breath for one second, and then breathe out for two seconds. Another strategy is to ground yourself. Focus on the feeling of your feet on the ground, and your butt in your chair. Count to ten. Try to get your body to slow down.

- **3.** Take a break. If you can't regulate your physiological response in the heat of the moment, it's okay to take a break. Remove yourself from the situation. Take a walk, go to the bathroom, or get a drink of water. Sometimes it can be easier to calm down when you are away from the triggering event or situation.
- 4. Listen more; talk less. This is a hard piece of advice to follow. But when you are triggered, usually it is a wise strategy to listen more and talk less. When you are triggered, it's difficult to have a productive conversation. Sometimes it's better to focus your energy on understanding the other person. The more you listen, the better your chances are of finding a productive way forward. Also, sometimes we feel an urge to respond **right in the moment**, but in most situations, it's okay to address the situation at a later time.

LOOK FOR THE NEED-NEED

When two people are stuck in a seemingly intractable conflict, sometimes they can find a way forward by identifying the underlying needs that are present under the surface below the conflict. What I mean is this: When we have a conflict or disagreement with someone, the conflict is at one level. I want this, and you want something different. Our wants seem incompatible with one another, so there is an impasse. We can't seem to find a way to move forward.

Here is the key question that each person should now ask themselves: What is the underlying need fueling my position in this conflict?

For example, maybe you have a need to feel safe or secure. Perhaps you have a need to feel powerful, autonomous, or in control. Maybe you have a need to feel loved or valued.

Once you have identified the underlying need fueling your position in the conflict, share it with the person you are in conflict with. Have the person listen and repeat it back to you to make sure the person got it. Then let the other person share their underlying need. Listen and repeat it back to them so they know you got it.

Sometimes sharing the underlying needs can illuminate a creative way forward that meets both people's needs. For example, I remember driving with a friend, and she asked if I would drive more slowly. I didn't want to. We had a conflict. We both identified the underlying needs fueling our positions in the conflict. My friend's underlying need was to feel safe. My underlying need was to be autonomous and not have someone tell me what to do. However, once I heard my friend's underlying need, my anger at being controlled dissipated. I realized she wasn't trying to control me, and I empathized with her need to feel safe. I made the decision to slow down in order to meet her need, and the conflict was resolved.

ACTION STEP



How are you doing at working through conflict in your relationships? This week, try to notice when you feel yourself being triggered, and see if you can use one of the helpful hints so you don't react in anger and do something you will regret. Also, if you are experiencing a conflict that seems difficult to resolve, have a conversation about each other's needs and see if that helps to shift the conversation.



FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

Even in good relationships, you will sometimes be hurt by the ones you love. This is inevitable, and cannot really be avoided. None of us are perfect, and none of us love each other well all the time. We each have our flaws, which can lead to us hurting or offending each other.

When you are hurt in relationship, you have a choice. Do you quit the relationship right then and there, or do you try to work through the pain and restore the relationship back to health? If you want a long-term committed relationship (e.g., spouse, family member, or friend), you will need to learn how to forgive each other. You will likely have to work through this process several times over the course of a relationship.

WHAT IS FORGIVENESS?

It is important to understand what forgiveness is, and what it is not. Sometimes people hold certain ideas about forgiveness that make forgiveness more difficult than it needs to be. Or even more important, sometimes people might have an understanding of forgiveness that makes forgiveness (as the person defines it) harmful or even dangerous.

I'd like to start by talking through some common misunderstandings about forgiveness. Here are a few things that most psychologists believe forgiveness is NOT:

1. Forgiveness is not forgetting. This is a common misconception, likely due to the oft-used phrase "forgive and forget." However, in most instances, it is impossible to truly forget something hurtful that has happened to you. When you forgive someone, your negative emotional reaction to the person who hurt you will likely go down. However, the event will probably never be truly erased

from your memory, like something out of the movie Total Recall. Some people think that if they still remember what happened, they haven't fully forgiven. But this isn't true.

- 2. Forgiveness is not saying what happened is okay. This is another common misconception of forgiveness. Many people believe that if they forgive someone, they let the person off the hook, or give the person who hurt them a free pass. Believing this misconception about forgiveness makes the process of forgiveness more difficult, because in addition to forgiveness, we also yearn for justice. And the fact is, certain hurts are not okay. If you are struggling with forgiveness, what happened to you probably wasn't okay. That's just the reality of the situation. Forgiveness doesn't change the moral dimension of the transgression, or the culpability of the person who hurt you.
- 3. Forgiveness is not reconciliation. This is probably the most important misconception, because it has a very real potential for harm. Many people view forgiveness and reconciliation as the same thing. It is true that in many situations, we choose to forgive because we want to repair a relationship with someone. But most psychologists agree that forgiveness and reconciliation are distinct processes, and you can forgive with or without reconciliation. This distinction is important in situations in which re-engaging with the person who hurt you might be harmful or dangerous, such as the case of a victim of abuse. If this situation describes you, it may be helpful for you to forgive, but it may not be advisable to reconcile with the person who hurt you.

Now that we have talked about what forgiveness is not, let's talk briefly about what forgiveness is. Put simply, forgiveness is a process that involves a change in one's thoughts and feelings toward someone who has hurt you in a direction that is less negative and (in some cases) more positive.

Let's look at each part of the definition in a bit more detail:

- 1. Forgiveness is a process. Forgiveness usually isn't a one-time deal. Instead, forgiveness is a process that occurs over time. To be successful, forgiveness usually takes concerted effort over a period of time. It's unrealistic to spend a few minutes thinking about forgiveness and expect it to happen quickly.
- 2. Forgiveness involves a change in one's thoughts and feelings. Forgiveness involves a change or shift in one's thoughts and feelings. When

someone gets hurt, usually their thoughts and feelings are negative toward the person who hurt them. For example, they might think, "He's such a jerk!" or "I hope something terrible happens to her!" They might feel sad, angry, or scared. As forgiveness unfolds, those thoughts and feelings tend to shift over time.

3. The direction of the change is a reduction of the negative and (in some cases) an increase of the positive. As forgiveness unfolds, the thoughts and feelings of the person who was hurt become less negative. Also, in some cases, the thoughts and feelings of the person who was hurt become more positive. Whether or not forgiveness also includes an increase of the positive usually depends on whether or not the hurt occurred in a continuing relationship. If the relationship is non-continuing (e.g., You were hurt by a stranger), forgiveness may involve only the reduction of negative thoughts and feelings, and the end goal might be to get back to neutral. However, if the relationship is continuing (e.g., You were hurt by your spouse), forgiveness likely involves both the reduction of the negative and the increase of the positive, and the end goal might be to get to a place that was even more positive than before the hurt.

HOW TO FORGIVE?

Researchers have found that there are 5 steps that can help people forgive. The steps can be easily remembered by the acronym REACH:

- 1. Recall the hurt in a neutral way. Many people, after they are hurt, ruminate about the offense and recall the hurt in an angry manner. Instead, try to recall the hurt in a neutral way, like a video camera would have captured the event, or how a neutral news reporter would have talked about what happened.
- 2. Empathize with the offender. Empathy is a strong predictor of forgiveness. If you can empathize with the person who hurt you, you are more likely to forgive that person. Can you put yourself in their shoes? Can you experience sympathy and compassion for where that person was when they hurt you?
- **3.** Altruistic gift of forgiveness. Some people feel pressure to forgive, perhaps because of their cultural or religious upbringing. But forgiveness under duress doesn't usually work. Instead, it's more helpful to think about forgiveness as a gift you choose to offer someone. You can choose to give the gift, or you can choose not to give the gift.

- 4. **Commit to forgive.** It can be helpful to do something concrete to mark your commitment to forgive. For example, you could write a letter describing the details of the transgression, and then decide to burn the letter. Or you could write and sign a certificate of forgiveness, listing the offender, transgression, and date.
- 5. Hold on to forgiveness. It is common to forgive someone, and then later be reminded about the offense, or even feel angry or scared about what happened. When this happens, it's important to remember that being reminded of the offense is normal—it doesn't mean you haven't forgiven. Also, it can be helpful to walk through the 5 steps to REACH forgiveness again.

ACTION STEP

(j)	F
$\ \blacksquare$	
\boxdot	Ĥ

Take stock in your relationships. Is there a hurt or offense you are holding on to? Do you think it might be helpful for you to forgive that offense? Take some time this week and work through each of the 5 steps to REACH forgiveness.