Relationship & Communication

SKILLS WORKBOOK

A guided workbook for building deeper connection, understanding, and trust in your relationship.



Based on the findings and methods of Drs. John and Julie Gottman, Non-Violent Communication by Dr. Marshall Rosenberg, and Emotionally Focused Therapy by Sue Johnson.

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This workbook is intended for educational purposes and is not a substitute for psychotherapy, medical care, or professional advice.

How to Use This Workbook

Begin with curiosity

You can work through this book in order or choose the sections that feel most relevant. There is no need to complete every exercise in one sitting.

Reflect at your own pace

Use the fillable writing spaces to notice your reactions, needs, and patterns. Save a copy of the PDF as you go so you can return to your answers.

Practice in everyday moments

Choose one small communication skill to practice between reflections. Change usually develops through repeated, manageable steps.

Respect your boundaries

You may skip an exercise, take a break, or complete it with the support of a qualified professional. Do not use shared exercises with a partner if doing so could put you at risk.

Protect your privacy

Your responses may contain personal information. Store the completed workbook privately, particularly on shared devices.

Working together or independently

You can use this workbook with your partner, each completing your own copy and sharing reflections when comfortable. You can also work independently, whether or not your partner participates.

Relationship patterns are shaped by how people respond to one another. Sometimes one person responding differently can shift the dynamic between both people. You cannot control another person's choices, but you can explore your own patterns and practice new ways of communicating.

Important Information & Safety

Educational use

This workbook is for education, self-reflection, and personal growth. It is not intended to diagnose, treat, or prevent mental health conditions and is not a substitute for psychotherapy, medical care, crisis intervention, or individualized professional advice. Using this workbook does not establish a therapist-client relationship with the author or Life Balance Counseling, LLC.

A Note About Relationship Safety

Healthy communication requires a foundation of emotional and physical safety. Some exercises may not be appropriate for relationships involving intimidation, coercive control, or abuse. In these circumstances, prioritize safety and seek individualized support rather than attempting potentially unsafe communication exercises together.

Abuse information and support

National Domestic Violence Hotline: www.thehotline.org | Call 800-799-7233 | Text START to 88788. If your internet activity may be monitored, consider using a safer device to seek information.

Suicidal thoughts, self-harm, or crisis

If you are having thoughts of suicide or self-harm, or are in emotional crisis, call or text **988** in the United States or visit 988lifeline.org for support. If you or someone else is in immediate danger, call 911 or your local emergency number.

THE 5:1 RATIO

Building a Positive Balance

Gottman and colleagues observed that, during conflict discussions, stable, satisfied couples showed roughly five positive interactions for each negative interaction. This is an observed pattern, not a daily quota or guarantee.



Positive Negative

POSITIVE INTERACTIONS

Showing interest in your partner's day

Expressing affection and appreciation

Finding opportunities for agreement

Showing empathy and understanding

Using humor to lighten tension

DAILY DEPOSITS

List five small positive actions you can take this week to build your relationship's emotional bank account.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Remember: the goal is not to avoid all negativity.

Aim for positive moments to outweigh the difficult ones.

Expressing What You Value

Research consistently shows that people who feel appreciated in their relationship report higher satisfaction. Expressing appreciation is one of the simplest and most powerful ways to strengthen your bond.

THE EXERCISE

Take turns as Speaker and Listener. The Listener's role is to be fully present—maintain eye contact, do not interrupt, and reflect back what you heard.

> "One thing I appreciate about you is [quality or behavior] and it makes me feel [emotion]."

EXAMPLES

"One thing I appreciate about you is the way you always ask about my day when I get home. It makes me feel seen and important to you."

"One thing I appreciate about you is your patience when I need time to process my feelings. It makes me feel safe and accepted."

"One thing I appreciate about you is how you make me laugh even on hard days. It makes me feel lighter and more connected to you."

YOUR PRACTICE

One thing I appreciate about you is:

And it makes me feel:

THE FOUR HORSEMEN

Patterns That Erode Connection

John Gottman identified four communication patterns associated with relationship distress and increased risk of breakdown. Recognizing them can create opportunities to respond differently.

1. Criticism



Attacking your partner's character rather than addressing a specific behavior.

Antidote: Use a gentle startup. Begin with 'I feel...' instead of 'You always...'

2. Contempt



Expressing superiority or disrespect through sarcasm, mockery, or eye-rolling.

Antidote: Build a culture of appreciation and respect.

3. Defensiveness



Deflecting responsibility or meeting complaints with counter-complaints.

Antidote: Accept responsibility, even for a small part.

4. Stonewalling



Withdrawing from interaction, shutting down, or becoming unresponsive.

Antidote: Practice self-soothing and return to the conversation.

REFLECTION

Which pattern do you recognize most in yourself?
What would it look like to practice the antidote this week?

SOFT STARTUP

How You Begin Matters

Relationship researcher John Gottman found that the way a difficult conversation begins is often a strong predictor of how it will end. In his research, the first few minutes of a discussion frequently revealed whether couples would move toward understanding or become trapped in defensiveness and conflict.

When conversations begin with criticism, blame, sarcasm, or accusation, people naturally become defensive.

When conversations begin with respect, honesty, and clarity, people are more likely to stay engaged and listen.

A soft startup is not about avoiding difficult conversations.

It is about bringing concerns forward in a way that increases the likelihood of understanding and problem-solving.

HARSH STARTUP VS. SOFT STARTUP

❌ "You never help around the house."
✅ "I've been feeling overwhelmed lately and could use more help around the house."

❌ "You're always on your phone."
✅ "I've been missing our connection and would love more time together."

❌ "You don't care about this family."
✅ "I've been feeling alone with some of these responsibilities and could use more support."



Reflection

Think about a recent difficult conversation.

How did it begin?

How might you have started it differently?



The Art of Being Heard



When your partner speaks, your role is not to fix, defend, or prepare your response. Your role is to understand.

PRACTICE

Turn toward your partner

Put down distractions. Make eye contact. Show you are present.

Reflect what you hear

Paraphrase their words back: 'What I hear you saying is...'

Clarify

Ask - "Did I hear you correctly?"

Validate their experience

You don't have to agree. Acknowledge their feelings are real.

Empathize

"I can imagine that was difficult for you."

Ask if your partner is ready for your perspective

"Would you like to hear my perspective now?"

CONVERSATION MAP

A Guide to Thoughtful Dialogue



Use these phrases as anchors during difficult conversations.
They signal safety, curiosity, and a willingness to understand.

SELF-REGULATION

Returning to Yourself Before Returning to the Conversation

When emotions become overwhelming, it can be harder to think clearly, listen, consider another perspective, or respond thoughtfully. Self-soothing can help us reconnect.



WHEN YOU FEEL FLOODED

1. Notice the signal

Racing heart, tight chest, clenched jaw, desire to withdraw or attack.

2. Name it without judgment

'I am flooded right now. I need time to regulate.'

3. Request a pause

'I want to continue this conversation. I need 20 minutes to calm down.'

4. Self-soothe

Walk, breathe, journal, stretch. Do something that calms your nervous system.

5. Return with intention

Come back when you can listen without defending.

What does flooding feel like in your body?

What helps you return to a calm state?

EMOTIONAL FLOODING

When Emotions Overwhelm

Flooding happens when your emotional intensity exceeds your capacity to think clearly. Your body goes into survival mode.



SIGNS YOU MAY BE FLOODED

- Racing heart or shallow breathing
- Feeling defensive or shut down
- Wanting to leave the room
- Difficulty hearing your partner
- Repeating yourself louder
- Feeling misunderstood or attacked
- Tunnel vision or racing thoughts
- Physical tension or clenched jaw

If you feel flooded, try a break of about 20 minutes or longer if needed. Focus on calming rather than rehearsing the argument, and agree on when to return.

MY CALMING PLAN

When I notice I am flooded, I will:

Moving Toward Understanding

Conflict is not the enemy of connection.
Unrepaired conflict is.



REPAIR ATTEMPTS

A repair attempt is any statement or action that prevents negative patterns from escalating out of control.

"I'm sorry. That came out wrong."

"Can we start over?"

"I can see my part in this."

"I want to understand your side."

"Let me try to say that differently."

"I appreciate you staying with me."

"What do you need from me right now?"

"We're on the same team."

REFLECTION

Think of a recent conflict. What repair attempt could you have made? What would you like to hear from your partner?

Turning Toward Your Partner

A bid is any attempt to connect. It can be a question, a look, a touch, a sigh, or a comment. How you respond matters deeply.

Turning Toward

Acknowledging the bid. Engaging.
'Tell me more about that.'
'That sounds interesting.'

Turning Away

Missing or ignoring the bid.
Continuing to scroll. Not looking up.
Changing the subject.

Turning Against

Responding with irritation or hostility.
'Can't you see I'm busy?'
'Why do you always interrupt me?'

THIS WEEK'S PRACTICE

Notice three bids your partner makes each day.
Record how you responded. Were you turning toward, away, or against?

Monday _____

Tuesday _____

Wednesday _____

Thursday _____

Friday _____

Saturday _____

Sunday _____

COMMUNICATION STYLES

How We Express Our Needs

Understanding your default communication style is the first step toward expressing yourself more effectively in relationships.

Aggressive

Expressing needs in a way that violates others' rights. This style uses blame, criticism, intimidation, or control to get what you want.

- Raised voice or yelling
- Blaming and accusing language
- Demanding rather than requesting
- Not listening to the other person

Passive-Aggressive

Indirectly expressing anger or frustration rather than openly addressing concerns. Appears cooperative on the surface while undermining underneath.

- Silent treatment or withdrawal
- Sarcasm disguised as humor
- Procrastination as punishment
- Saying 'fine' when it is not fine

Assertive

Expressing your needs, feelings, and boundaries clearly and respectfully while honoring the other person's rights and dignity.

- Using 'I' statements
- Calm, steady tone of voice
- Active listening and validation
- Setting boundaries with kindness

REFLECTION

Which style do you default to under stress?

What could assertive communication look like?

Examples and Components

Assertive communication has four key components:

1. Observations ? Describe what happened without interpretation or judgment.
2. Feelings ? Name your emotional response.
3. Needs ? Identify what matters to you.
4. Requests ? Ask for a specific action, leaving room for a genuine response.

THE FORMULA

"I feel _____ when _____. I need _____. I would like _____."

EXAMPLES

Situation: Partner comes home late without calling.

"I feel worried and unimportant when you come home late without letting me know. I need to feel considered. I would like you to send a quick text if your plans change."

Situation: Partner interrupts during a conversation.

"I feel frustrated and unheard when I get interrupted mid-sentence. I need space to finish my thoughts. I would like you to wait until I am done before responding."

Situation: Partner makes plans without checking in.

"I feel left out when plans are made without asking me. I need to feel like a partner in decisions that affect us both. I would like us to check in with each other before committing to plans."

YOUR TURN

Practice your assertive statement on the following page.

Practice Your Statement

Think of a recent situation. Try the four components:

What happened (without judgment)?

How did you feel?

What did you need?

What specific request would you like to make?

Knowing Your Partner's Inner World

John Gottman uses the term Love Maps to describe how well we know the inner world of the people we love. A strong Love Map includes knowledge of your partner's hopes, worries, values, goals, interests, and current life experiences.

Relationships often suffer not because people stop caring, but because they stop staying curious. Love Maps help us stay emotionally connected by continuing to learn who our partner is today—not just who they were when we first met.

The more detailed your Love Map becomes, the easier it is to respond with empathy, support, and understanding.

REFLECTION

What is currently causing stress in my partner's life?

What is one goal or dream my partner is working toward?

What is something my partner is excited about right now?

What is one concern they may be carrying?

What is something important to my partner that I may not fully understand?



Use the next page to journal your reflections on each question.

Reflection Journal

What is currently causing stress in my partner's life?

What is one goal or dream my partner is working toward?

What is something my partner is excited about right now?

What is one concern they may be carrying?

What is something important to my partner that I may not fully understand?

Additional Reflection

What have you learned about your partner that surprised you?

What would you like to ask or explore together?

BENEATH THE CONFLICT

What Is the Argument Really About?

Conflicts may appear to be about money, relatives, chores, children or sex. But in reality, they are often about something much deeper.

> As couples therapist Sue Johnson observed, beneath many arguments is a longing to know: "Are you there for me?"

When we feel disconnected, unseen, dismissed, controlled, or unimportant, strong emotions can quickly emerge.

NEEDS VS. WANTS

A want is a preferred solution.
A need is the deeper human experience we are hoping to protect or create.

Want	Possible Need
"I want you to text me when you're running late."	Connection, reassurance, consideration
"I want more help around the house."	Partnership, support, fairness
"I want you to stop criticizing me."	Respect, acceptance, emotional safety

According to Marshall Rosenberg's work in Nonviolent Communication, conflicts often become easier to resolve when people move beyond arguing about solutions and begin exploring the needs underneath them.

Two people may want very different things while sharing many of the same underlying needs.

Reflection

Think about a recent disagreement.
What need might have been underneath your position?

- [ ] Connection / Belonging
- [ ] Respect / Acknowledgment
- [ ] Safety
- [ ] Autonomy
- [ ] Support
- [ ] Trust
- [ ] Fairness
- [ ] Appreciation
- [ ] Other: _____

What need might your partner have been trying to protect?

THERAPIST'S NOTE

Conflict often softens when we stop asking:
"Who's right?"
and begin asking:
"What need is each person trying to meet?"

EMOTIONAL VOCABULARY

Naming What We Feel Helps Others Understand Us

Relationship researcher and therapist Sue Johnson observed that couples often become stuck when they communicate their reactions rather than their deeper emotions.

Many of us have learned to express emotions such as anger, frustration, criticism, or withdrawal. These reactions are real, but they may not fully communicate what is happening beneath the surface.

When we can identify and share our deeper feelings, we give others a clearer path toward understanding and connection.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EMOTIONS

Secondary emotions are often the emotions we show.

- Anger
- Irritation
- Frustration
- Defensiveness
- Withdrawal

Primary emotions are often the emotions underneath.

- Hurt
- Fear
- Loneliness
- Sadness
- Shame
- Disappointment
- Uncertainty
- Vulnerability

For example:

Instead of: "You never listen to me."

The deeper experience might be:
"I feel alone when I don't feel heard."

Instead of: "I don't care anymore."

A note about emotions: anger can be a direct response to injustice or a boundary violation; it does not always conceal another feeling. Explore with curiosity rather than assuming.

Why This Matters

People often respond defensively to criticism.
People are more likely to respond with empathy to vulnerability.

When we share our deeper emotional experience, we make connection more possible.

REFLECTION

Think about a recent conflict.

What emotion did you show?
What emotion might have been underneath?
What would it sound like to communicate that deeper feeling?

COMMON EMOTIONAL VOCABULARY

Sad	Fearful	Connection Needs	Positive Feelings
Hurt	Anxious	Unseen	Appreciated
Disappointed	Insecure	Unimportant	Connected
Lonely	Uncertain	Rejected	Safe
Grieving	Overwhelmed	Disconnected	Loved
Discouraged	Worried	Unsupported	Hopeful

THERAPIST'S NOTE

Sometimes the most important sentence in a relationship begins with: "What I'm really feeling is..."



FINDING THE SHARED GOAL

Looking Beyond Positions

According to Marshall Rosenberg, conflicts often become stuck when people focus on their preferred solution rather than the need they are trying to meet.

For example:

One partner says: "We need to save more money."
The other says: "We need to enjoy life while we can."

At first glance, these goals appear to conflict.

But underneath, both partners may be seeking:

- Security
- Stability
- Well-being
- Peace of mind

The disagreement is often about how to meet the need—not whether the need matters.

POSITIONS VS. NEEDS

Position Vs. Need	
"I want more time alone."	Rest, autonomy, self-care
"I want us to spend more time together."	Connection, belonging, intimacy
"We need to stick to a budget."	Security, predictability
"I want to take a vacation."	Renewal, joy, adventure
"You never help around the house."	Fairness, partnership, feeling valued
"I don't want your parents visiting."	Boundaries, space, respect
"We should move closer to my family."	Support, belonging, roots
"Stop telling me what to do."	Autonomy, trust, competence
"I need you to text me back faster."	Reassurance, connection, mattering
"We should have date nights."	Prioritization, romance, closeness
Different strategies.	Valid needs on both sides.

FINDING THE SHARED GOAL

Moving From Opposition to Partnership

When conflict becomes intense, it is easy to focus on differences.

We begin to see each other as opponents rather than partners.

Many disagreements involve competing strategies rather than competing goals.
Before discussing solutions, it can be helpful to ask:

> What are we both ultimately trying to accomplish?

Identifying a shared goal creates a foundation for collaboration and problem-solving.

Once a shared goal is clear, it becomes easier to evaluate whether different approaches are helping move toward that goal.

EXAMPLES OF MUTUAL GOALS

Money

Partner A:
"We need to save more."

Partner B:
"We need to enjoy life more."

Shared Goal:
"We want financial stability and a meaningful life."

Now they're discussing strategies rather than defending positions.

Household Responsibilities

Partner A:
"You don't help enough."

Partner B:
"I feel criticized no matter what I do."

Shared Goal:
"We want a home that feels supportive and fair for both of us."

Looking at Strategies

A DIFFERENT QUESTION

Instead of asking:

"Who is right?"

Try asking:

"Which approach best serves our shared goal?"

If you have a completely different approach, consider:

Consulting a third party or a credible source of information together.

Also consider asking:

"How could both of these strategies work together?"

Instead of either/or - can it be both/and?

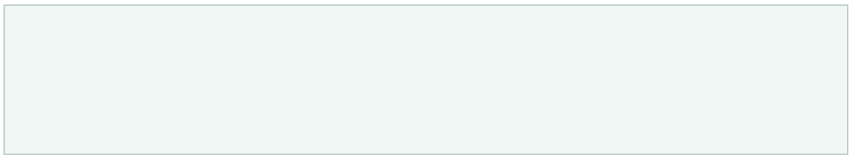
What shared goal did we identity?

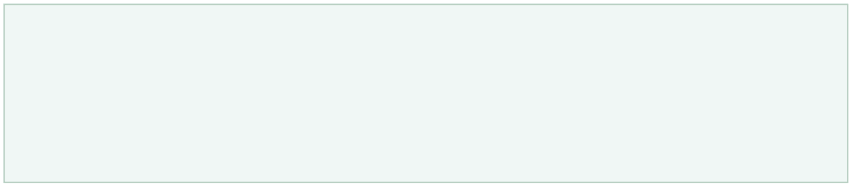
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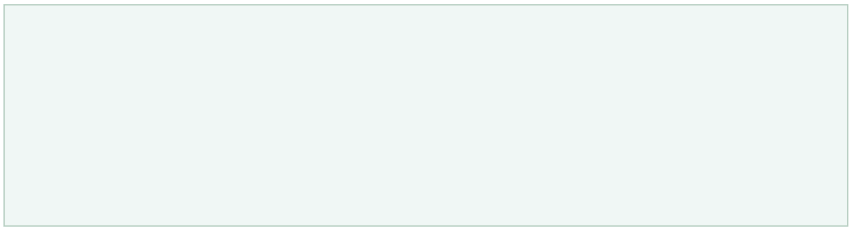
What would it look like if we approached this as partners rather than opponents?

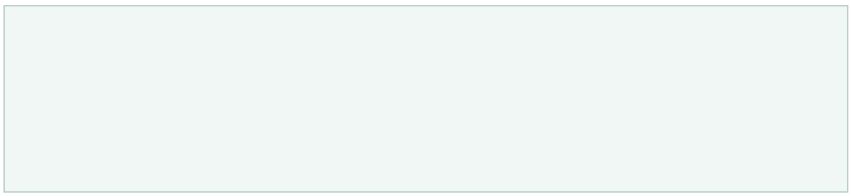
Is there a way to combine our approaches (both/and)?

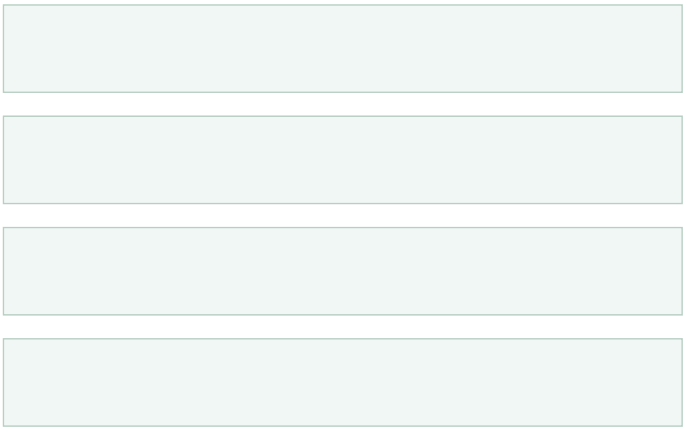












A Note on Research

Research findings and clinical models

This workbook draws on relationship research and established therapeutic approaches. Research findings describe patterns observed in groups; they do not predict the outcome of any particular relationship. Exercises are educational adaptations.

The 5:1 ratio

Gottman and Levenson observed an approximate five-to-one balance of positive and negative interactions in stable, satisfied couples during conflict discussions. It is not a rule for every day or a substitute for addressing serious harm.

The Four Horsemen

Criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling are concerning patterns. High divorce-prediction figures reported in some Gottman studies should not be attributed to the Four Horsemen alone.

Emotion and regulation

Strong arousal may interfere with attention and flexible thinking; the brain does not literally switch off. A 20-minute pause is a practical guideline, not a fixed biological requirement. Return to discussion when sufficiently regulated.

A clinical perspective

Conflict may involve attachment needs, practical differences, or incompatible values. Shared goals do not require compromise on safety or personal boundaries.

Sources & Further Reading

Relationship research

Gottman, J. M., & Levenson, R. W. (1992). Marital processes predictive of later dissolution: Behavior, physiology, and health. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 63(2), 221–233.

Gottman Institute research explanations

The Magic Relationship Ratio, According to Science
gottman.com/blog/the-magic-relationship-ratio-according-science/
Frequently Asked Questions — Research: gottman.com/about/research/faq/

Nonviolent Communication

Rosenberg, M. B. (2015). Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life (3rd ed.). PuddleDancer Press. Four components: observations, feelings, needs, requests. A request is distinct from a demand: the other person may decline.

Emotionally Focused Therapy

Johnson, S. M. (2008). Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love. Little, Brown. Attachment needs can inform conflict without explaining every disagreement.

Putting the skills into practice

Meaningful changes can grow through small, repeated actions. This is a practical therapeutic principle rather than a claim that small actions always outperform large efforts. Anger may be primary or secondary, depending on the situation.

About the Author

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Yael DiPlacido is a clinical social worker and psychotherapist who has spent the past two decades helping individuals navigate emotional challenges, trauma, and relationship difficulties.

Yael believes that meaningful change begins when we become curious about ourselves and one another, rather than approaching our struggles with judgment.

She created this workbook to help individuals and couples better understand their patterns, communicate more effectively, and develop the skills that support healthier, more connected relationships.

Based in Missouri, Yael provides telehealth psychotherapy to adults and couples throughout the state.

More information

Life Balance Counseling, LLC | www.lifebalancemissouri.com