

NOURISHING THE SECURE ATTACHMENT SYSTEM

Skills and Practices to Improve the Quality of Connection in your Relationships

(Many ideas borrowed from Diane Poole Heller's Healing Your Attachment Wounds with additional input from the research from the Gottman Institute, and by Susan Johnson.)

1. Practice Presence

Intimacy increases with the quality of our presence. We've all had friends who talked with us on the phone while they were multitasking on the other end and we know how unfulfilling that can feel. Lack of focused, attentive time with our partner blocks opportunities for intimacy. In our busy lives we will all have many points in a day when we are unable to give our full attention, but are you aware of this and working to correct any imbalances here. You can begin to be more mindful about how often you are giving your partner your full attention and take steps to increase this powerful tool for enhancing intimacy. Take stock:

How regularly when you are with your partner are you fully focused on your partner?

Do you consistently show up for your partner when needed?

Are you present or distracted most of the time?

Assess for yourself how well you do at being fully present for your partner and where you might improve the quality of your presence

Ask your partner for feedback on how you do on this and where they might like more of your presence

2. Give Loving Looks

"The eyes are the window to your soul." -William Shakespeare

There is something powerfully intimate about eye contact, as we have certainly all experienced. When couples are first falling in love, sending loving looks, exchanging intense eye contact and holding long, loving gazes is something that often comes quite naturally. After the chemical cocktail of first love wears off, it can be easy for this to end. But this is a powerful tool for reigniting passion and can be done intentionally to increase a sense of connection and attraction to our partner. It can also remind us of the felt sense of our early attraction which is an added secure connection booster. Assess:

When you greet your partner, what energy are you sending from your eyes?

What happens when you really allow your eyes to move into this sense of sweetness and wellbeing and love and warmth for your partner?

When was the last time, in public, you sent your partner a loving gaze from across the room?

Remember a time your partner sent you a loving look from across a crowded room.
How did you feel?

3. Attune to Your Partner

One of the greatest gifts we give our loved ones is the feeling of “being felt”. Secure partners help each other feel understood and met. Depending on who you are, this may require some effort on your part to understand your partner’s experience, to be curious about what it’s like living in their skin, to try and feel in your body what it might be like to be them in any given circumstance. Assess:

How well and how regularly do you try to hold a position of curiosity rather than judgement in conversation with your partner about their experience?

How well do you listen and attune?

Ask your partner for feedback on times you have done well and where they might appreciate more attuned listening in your relationship. And see if you can make this a regular part of your relationship assessment in collaboration with your partner.

4. Be Sensitive and Aware with Comings and Goings

The attachment system is very sensitive to comings and goings. When this isn’t understood it is easy for a partner to dismiss the validity of the distress that they or their partner feels when they separate to go to work or to travel solo. Even short comings and goings can trigger the primal attachment fears that are wired into our brains through our attachment system—fear of abandonment, divorce, betrayal, death. For this reason, it is very easy to unintentionally undermine our secure attachment system. When you make an effort to attend to, ritualize, and nourish your comings and goings with attention, focus and connection, you can avoid triggering these primal fears and your relationship will be on more stable ground. Some ways to do this are simply to make an effort to always acknowledge your partner’s comings and goings. Stan Tatkin recommends doing “the welcome home hug”, where the first one home commits to welcoming the other with their full attention and a long warm hug every day. One trick is to stay in this embrace long enough to feel your bodies begin to relax. Your systems can come to naturally co-regulate in this way and if you stay here long enough to notice that overtime you will begin to feel your partner as regulating to your system. Once this is the case, you will want to be with them more, you will feel more attraction, you will feel more cared for in your relationship. The Gottmans talk about the power of the 6 second kiss and recommend this at both comings and goings. Don’t take their word for it. Try it and see what happens! Take stock:

What would feel nourishing for you and your partner to acknowledge and perhaps ritualize comings and goings?

When is the last time you welcomed your partner home with full attention, loving words and a long, regulating hug?

Ask your partner how they feel currently with your approach to comings and goings and any needs they might have. How could you make this super nourishing?

5. Make Physical Co-regulating a Priority

Regulation is a physical experience. As such, our physical bodies and nervous systems need time in physical contact with our partner to get in sync and to regulate. We will naturally co-regulate given enough time, safety, connection and attention. Anytime we are trying to understand how and why physical regulation is so important, it can be helpful to think about how we naturally soothe babies. We have these skills wired into our bones. We know how to do this. We rock. We sing. We pat. We rub. We massage. We hug. We hold. We seem to understand this with children, but we forget the power of this as we become adults and shouldn't need this sort of thing anymore. But the truth is...these things work. We do them for kids because it's what works, and it works for the most seriously dysregulated among us (babies) who come into the world without any developed strategies for calming down themselves. But not only do these things work for us, they are also how WE were trained as babies by our parents to calm and to soothe. This understanding of the body can be incredibly powerful when intentionally and consciously put to use to strengthen the secure attachment system.

One caveat: Touch can be hard for people. But don't throw the baby out with the bath water. If this section is triggering for you or you are meeting resistance as you consider this suggestion, this likely means that you would benefit from some help from a therapist to navigate this terrain more skillfully. It does not mean that you are broken or that touch isn't for you. But it almost certainly means that more care will be needed to be sure that whatever touch you are utilizing is in fact soothing. Forcing yourself through this will not help if this is the case. Sensitivity is key. Figuring out what does work and doing more of that is a great first step. Again, the key here is that we are trying to help your system FEEL your partner as a regulating force. If doing these exercises isn't doing that then you are reinforcing the sense that they are the enemy, which is the opposite of our goal. Taking the time to do this work gently and carefully can be particularly healing in this case and can transform the degree of safety you feel in relationship and help to make touch and ultimately sex more consistently a comforting and exciting part of your relationship.

What touch/physical connecting feels really nourishing and good for your system? Get specific ("cuddling on the couch with that fuzzy grey blanket, your arm here and my arm here is the best for me..." etc. Show your partner exactly what you mean.)

Ask your partner what touch feels really nourishing and good for them.

Can you find a way to add more touch and physical connection into your week? How? When? Plan it!

Can you take turns giving and receiving exactly what would be best for you?

Notice what happens when you focus on this for a week. Do you feel more connected? Less? What does that tell you about what helps?

6. Spend Enough Time Noticing When You Are Connecting

As Stan Tatkin says, we are wired more for war than love. Fight or flight is wired into our fastest brain systems. Our body begins activating to fight danger before our conscious mind has even registered that danger is present. This is good news when we are being chased by a lion, but not so good when we are trying to negotiate a loving relationship with our partner. Our system's efforts to make sure that it is keeping us from danger means that it will automatically notice and prioritize any triggers to the danger system and automatically disregard any of the safe, good, loving feelings. To circumvent our wiring, we need to give the body (and the brain) more time to notice the good things, safe feelings, connected moments, lest they get unnoticed, unfelt and disregarded. What I am suggesting on the ground is simply taking a few extra seconds during moments of authentic, loving connection to notice how it feels in your body.

If we let our own natural human tendencies run wild and unchecked we will undoubtedly feel, a good percentage of the time, extreme and unnecessary anxiety and fear. We will also feel utterly unsupported, unloved and untended to.

To work with this physiological reality skillfully, we must give the connection system more time and conscious awareness than the fear system. Feeling the good things in our lives: the support, the ease, the sweetness from our partner requires **conscious awareness and effortful noticing of the felt sense of any goodness we are receiving**. Doing this is simple:

1. We can begin to be more active in our efforts at noticing as often as we are able when something feels safe, or good and catch ourselves feeling it more often
2. Once we notice, we can feel into our felt sense of what that's like by asking things like: "how do I know this feels good? What sensations are happening in my body as I notice this good thing? Where do I notice the goodness? How would I describe it? Is there any way I can feel into this more, or increase the sensations of goodness?"
3. We can imagine ourselves soaking up the goodness like water into a sponge
4. We can take more time here than we would naturally, really giving our system the time it needs to notice the positive feelings

Part of the work of skillful loving is making sure that you and your partner are giving each other quality love and presence and the other part is make sure you both have the capacity to notice, feel and receive it.

7. Be Aware of Your Partners Needs Regarding Transitions Between Separate and Together Time

Many partners (particularly those who can tend towards a more avoidant or dismissive attachment pattern) have real difficulty in the transition between time alone and into time together. Some folks can get very deeply into their own head space and it can be difficult to surface quickly out of that. Diane Heller Poole equates this to deep sea diving. The deeper the diver is the slower they need to surface and recalibrate. It is easy for some partners (particularly those who can tend towards a more anxious or ambivalent attachment pattern) to take this personally. It can feel like your partner is resistant to spending time with you, but this is not usually the case. Once we recognize that this is an attachment challenge and not a personal reflection on whether or not our partner wants to spend time with us, it can be managed more skillfully. Anticipating this (without judgement) can help you manage this. Giving avoidant partners enough warning or reminders about these transitions can help.

Is it easy or hard for you to move from separate time to together time?

Is it easy or difficult for your partner?

Is there anything you would like to do to manage this more skillfully?

8. Play with your partner

Play is a powerful way to nourish the attachment system. Subvert whatever cultural norms you need to allow for the time and energy to do this. Notice when work or other responsibilities short-cut it. Do new and interesting things together. There is research to support the idea that novelty actually creates attraction in the brain. This is easy and almost natural when relationships begin but often over time we tend to put our relationship on autopilot. We are natural automatons. We automate just about everything in our lives, so some effort is necessary to resist this when it comes to our relationships. We need to actively challenge our assumptions about who we think our partner is in order to keep our sense of our partner alive and current. Work to learn and find out new and interesting things about who your partner is today.

What is a way you and your partner used to love to play together?

What is something you've always wanted to do with your partner but haven't? What is something they've always talked about wanting to do with you? Plan a mystery date for your partner (if they like surprises) or take turns planning novelty dates regularly.

What are the barriers to doing this? Can you address them?
(Be creative. This doesn't have to cost money or excessive amounts of time.)

Go through Gottman's Open Ended Questions exercise (ask your therapist for this if you don't have it!) Notice anything that surprised you.

9. Practice Consistent responsiveness

It is important that to the best of your ability you are giving your partner the message "I am here for you". To that end, the more you are able to respond to your partner's efforts at communication, the better. Contact maintenance matters. Respond whenever possible to texts, calls, emails. Keep your partner current on what's going on for you. Practice consistency and speedy returns to bids for connection. This matters because it's the grown up version of signal cries with babies. In this way your partner learns the answer to the questions, "are you really there for me?", "will you help me get my needs met?", "do you care?", "will you be there when I really need you?"

If someone asks for something there needs to be a timeliness to the response, and a committed effort at support. Sometimes this is not possible and especially avoidant partners can feel like impossible requests are being made. The reality is, people need to work and depending on your situation, your partner may not be able to respond as quickly or consistently as you'd like. But partners can manage the stress of these times better when the consistent responsiveness is there whenever it is possible to do so. This often feels hardest when the relationship could use some real work on this aspect. Once the relationship

establishes more safety and the answer to these security questions are answered with a clear and consistent, “YES! You matter to me and your needs matter too. You will be seen and heard and met in this relationship”, then there is usually less distress, less demanding bids and less requests for constant communication at times when that is hardest to give.

This will remain important throughout your relationship, though, and can be a good measure for how connected you and your partner are feeling. When the intensity bids for communication are happening this is a clue that you need to reprioritize quality connection or take a look at how well you are showing up in relationship.

This will be hard for the avoidantly attached and some thinking about how to make this work for you each partner in the relationship may be necessary. But make no mistake, it matters. John Gottman did research that showed that the most critical difference in whether or not a couple stayed together happily or divorced was how well they managed bids for connection. Couples who stayed together happily responded to each others’ bids 94% of the time vs. 33% for unhappy couples.

Note: It is important that there is no tit for tat in this, no sense of retaliation or price to pay if a need is expressed. Needs met with strings attached is an all too common experience originating often from our family of origins (your relationship with parents). So this is tender for people and a surefire way to undermine any efforts at secure, loving partnership.

What happens for you when you read this paragraph? Does it sound good?
Scary? Impossible? Do you love the idea, hate it?

What happens for your partner?

How patient, curious and compassionate can you be about your partner’s
response to this when it is different than yours?

Can you try and understand with compassion the reasons behind these
differences?

Can you begin to allow your partner’s challenges in this area (whether you feel
they ask too much, or give too little) as a reaction to their history and not
a personal attack on you? What makes it easier or harder to do that?