

Emotional Connection Exercise – for Couples

Over time, and through the transitions and general busyness of life, the emotional connection in our primary relationship can decrease if not attended to.

Sometimes, because of attachment trauma from the past, one or both of you may never have felt able to fully connect emotionally with yourselves or each other

Our Autonomic Nervous System is constantly scanning our environment – and each other – for signs of emotional safety and danger. The aim of this exercise is to nurture a safe and supportive emotional connection in your relationship, through small, incremental change.

Planning your emotional connection time:

1. Develop your customised plan together, away from stress or busyness, when you have uninterrupted time to give to the conversation
2. Respect each other's needs and preferences as you build the framework for your emotional connection exercise
3. Be specific in your agreements of the rules of the exercise and support one another to adhere to them

The setting

Place	Choose a place in the home that you associate with calm and relaxation and make sure you always use the same place for the exercise, when possible.
Time	Choose a time of day that fits with your schedules and routines. If there are children in the home, this may need to be after they have gone to bed, but make sure it's not so late that you feel too tired to fully attend to the exercise
Frequency	If it doesn't feel arduous to do the exercise every day, then that's great. But it shouldn't become a chore. Once per week is better than nothing, and twice a week is even better. The key is to choose your schedule and stick to it. Change comes from small, incremental changes, which gradually become new habits.
Physical position	Sit, facing one another, close enough to feel connected, but with enough distance between you to not feel crowded. If possible, sit in two chairs that promote a comfortable but alert posture. Sitting on a couch may require twisting towards one another, or promote slouching, which is not ideal. If you feel inclined to connect by holding hands, across the space, great, but not mandatory

The exercise

Script	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decide who will be person 1 and who will be person 2 • Person 1 begins speaking, using the words "today in the relationship I feel..." • Person 1 then continues to share their emotional experience in the relationship today (feelings, not thoughts) • Take between 30 seconds and a minute to share • Person 2's job, while Person 1 is sharing, is simply to receive. No planning responses, searching for solutions or fixes – just listening
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When Person 1 has finished, Person two reflects what they have heard, starting with “What I heard you say is...”. As you reflect, be sure only to reflect what you have heard. No additions, no responses, just reflect what you heard. It doesn’t matter if you can’t remember everything that was shared. • When the reflection is completed, person 2 becomes the speaker and the exercise is repeated • The allocation of time for the entire exercise is no more than 10 minutes
Tips and traps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you are a ‘task-focused’ person who likes to fix things, it may be a challenge to simply listen and not offer solutions. Be disciplined, stick to the script. Chances are, your partner doesn’t want you to always fix things, but just wants to be heard • The exercise is deliberately short and contained. You might feel tempted, after the exercise, to allow things to drift into a more involved conversation, or even a conflict. Save the conversation for another time. After the exercise, leave the space. The aim is to build your confidence and emotional safety in simply connecting – fully and without distraction – for this short period • This exercise is asking you to connect in a new way – or a way that you haven’t connected for a good while. It’s O.K. if at first you don’t know what to say. Stick with it and don’t allow it to turn into a surface-level chat. Don’t expect it to feel comfortable. It will get easier.
Adaptations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t rush to adapt this exercise before getting comfortable with the original, simple structure • An adaptation I often use with couples in my counselling sessions is “a fear I have about our relationship is...”, followed by “a hope I have for our relationship is... ”. • Remember, if you do make your own adaptations, stick to the fundamentals regarding the setting, the timings and not falling into the above traps

Change happens through small, incremental actions, performed consistently over time. Your attempts at emotional reconnection will not always be successful. Debrief the successes and the stumbles together, when you feel able, and try to do better next time.