

AUTHENTIC CONNECTIONS

DEVELOPING
INTIMATE
RELATIONSHIPS



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“If you want honesty and love,
you have to be honest and
loving and lovable.”

AKSEL HENNIE

INTRODUCTION

Authenticity is a prerequisite to intimacy. There are many layers to authentic connections, communication being only part of it. Authenticity is a learned skill that needs to be nurtured and reinforced.

Unfortunately, most of us do not learn to relate authentically as children. Learning this as an adult usually requires more internal work than most would recognize. It requires some risks, but it is so worth it.

Authentic connections require several elements:

1. **Safety in relationships.** This is particularly true in complicated relationships with people who lack emotional intelligence – and especially hard to achieve.

2. **Self-acceptance.** Learning to accept ourselves (and others) as the perfectly imperfect humans that we are is also necessary. This quality leads to relationship and emotional safety, as we will discuss in more detail.

3. **Self-awareness.** Self-awareness enables us to understand more about who we are and what makes us tick. It is about learning to embrace our strengths and limitations, good and not-so-good qualities, sensitivities, and vulnerabilities.

As we come to terms with the fact that we are all these things, not either/or, **we realize how this ‘messiness that is me’ affects our relationships.** It allows us to find ways to work with the messiness instead of denying it.

warts and all. As we learn self-compassion and acceptance, we are better able to feel and express empathy for others in all their messiness.

Conscious risk-taking involves piecing all these elements together with the ability to recognize who can reciprocate. Not everyone is capable of emotional intimacy. Many are unable to cope with open and honest connection. Conscious risk-taking allows you to determine when and with whom it is safe to be authentic.

Learn more about these elements and enjoy the journey!

SAFETY: THE FOUNDATION OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

John Gottman is one of the pioneers in relationship education. He does fascinating research with couples that involves quantifying their responses during conversations to assess their relationships.

He and his wife teach couples, therapists, and coaches the skills involved in healthy relationships. From their work, many couples have learned to connect in a more intimate way and grow their relationships.

Safety in Relationships

Gottman and others talk about **three types of relationship safety that must be in place for couples to have intimate, healthy relationships**. As we discuss the

need to be more authentic in our relationships, you will see that his theory applies to most of them.

These are the three types of relationship safety:

1. Physical Safety. We need to feel safe from physical harm before we'll speak openly. Physical safety includes no hitting, slapping, pushing, shoving, scratching, choking, pulling, or in any way touching someone with the intention of harming them or expressing your frustration, anger, or need to control and dominate.

- Many times, people say, “He (or she) never hit me!” But you later learn that they were choked or pushed. None of this leads to feeling safe!

2. **Emotional Safety.** Emotional safety is knowing you may speak openly about how you feel, what you think, or what you did without fear of being humiliated, ridiculed, shut out, or otherwise emotionally punished. If any of these are possible outcomes, we're less likely to be open and honest emotionally.

3. **Relationship Safety.** Relationship safety allows you to feel secure enough in the relationship that you are willing to risk being honest - with no fear of being abandoned or pushed aside.
 - Those who have difficult relationships where one party threatens to leave when things are hard are less likely to be honest and open.

If you think of safety as the foundation upon which everything is built, you realize

that if one of the three ‘legs of the stool’ is missing, the foundation upon which you build is unstable.

STORY:

Randy and Nancy

Randy and Nancy have been a couple for over a decade. They’re comfortable in their life together. However, Randy wants to get married and then have a couple of children.

Nancy isn’t convinced that motherhood is for her. She enjoys the freedom of being without children and knows that most of the care will fall on her.

Randy works long hours and has a great job. Nancy wants to go to graduate school and build a private therapy practice. She doesn’t see room for a child in her near future.

In the past when this discussion has come up, Nancy hasn't budged on her position. At the age of 30, she sees her relationship as satisfactory. Adding a child will derail her career goals, and she has stated that if he wants children, Randy will need to find another partner.

Randy hates conflict. He avoids anything that may result in a disagreement, which is how they have stayed together for ten years. Nancy can be a hothead when she feels pressured and often reacts with anger when confronted.

Randy wants to bring up the issue of marriage and parenting, but dreads the likely argument that will follow. He knows that if he doesn't bring it up, the issue won't get resolved. At this point, he feels the need to settle it and decide if he will stay in the relationship without children.

Using the **Relationship Safety Assessment** he learned in couples' counseling, he sat down to consider the possibilities.

RELATIONSHIP SAFETY ASSESSMENT

1 - DANGER 2 - RISKY 3 - SAFE

Physical Safety:

Nancy has never been physically aggressive – that is not a concern.

SCORE: 3

Emotional Safety:

Nancy is not a touchy-feely type and she can have a bad temper at times. She considers this subject closed and is likely to become angry if he raises it again. Although she is not emotionally abusive, he simply does not like conflict and shuts down when anyone expresses anger.

SCORE: 1


Relationship Safety:

Nancy has said for years that if he wants children, he will need to find another partner. He has tried to let it go but feels something is missing from his life without children. He is considering the possibility of leaving if Nancy does not agree and realizes that she may end the relationship before he is sure about it.

SCORE: 1

Decision:

Randy is not ready to end the relationship, but he is willing to risk that Nancy may leave if he initiates this conversation again. He has planned to call his sister for support if things do not go well.



“Enlightenment is the key to everything, and it is the key to intimacy, because it is the goal of true authenticity.”

MARIANNE WILLIAMSON

ACCEPTANCE OF SELF AND OTHERS

It behooves us (and everyone we know) to spend time in honest self-reflection. This helps us come to terms with the fact that **we are both good and bad, positive and negative, darkness and light - not one or the other - just like everyone else in the world.**

Carl Jung, world renowned psychiatrist, writer, and healer, talked about the shadow selves - those parts of us that we want to disown and deny - as being critical to our self-understanding and personal growth.

Paradoxically, it is only by embracing these qualities that they lose power over us.

By accepting ourselves as human, and therefore imperfect, we are better able to accept others.

As we stop judging ourselves, our thoughts, and our behaviors as good or bad, we begin to accept ourselves as the fallible human beings we are and accept others as the same.

This is necessary to create safety in our relationships.

SELF-AWARENESS AND VULNERABILITY

With raised awareness of our imperfection comes some degree of vulnerability. **Most of us don't do vulnerability well.** It feels emotionally risky, and it can be if we share it in an unsafe relationship or with those who aren't equipped to cope with our openness and honesty.

Brene Brown, shame and vulnerability researcher out of University of Texas, Houston, talks about being present *with* people. She points out that *being with* (instead of *doing for or to*) someone who expresses their vulnerability also makes us feel vulnerable.

As such, **we must learn to accept and sit with our own vulnerability to connect with others when and how they need us.** Authenticity - being real - can be risky. That level of honesty leaves us open to

criticism, rejection, manipulation, and other scary things.

There are times when it's not appropriate (work, perhaps) and people who aren't able to share intimately (Nancy and Kaylee's father). **Sharing authentically should be reserved only for those who can cope with it and reciprocate.** That probably leaves out most of your contact list.

It can be so tempting to pour our hearts out to those we want and expect to love us. Taking the risk seems worth it if this will be the time he or she gets it, even though past attempts have been abject failures.

STORY:

Kaylee

Kaylee is a 12-year-old whose father is an alcoholic and has little experience giving or receiving love. His primary emotional expression is anger. He would be described generously as emotionally and verbally unkind.

Because he has been physically absent most of Kaylee's life, she has no real relationship with him but desperately wants him to love her.

Kaylee has only had contact with her father for the past three years. During that time, she has spent holidays with his 'family' and attempted to talk on the phone occasionally. His wife spends time with her on her visits, but Dad is usually not home.

Their two children are young, so they require most of the adult time. Kaylee usually watches TV alone when she is there. When her dad is home, he doesn't know what to say to her, so he avoids eye contact. He is usually drinking, which makes her uncomfortable. She tries not to do anything that will make him yell.

Kaylee's therapist taught her to use this informal safety assessment before talking with her dad. The safety assessment can help her make a conscious decision about the risks associated with anything she wants to talk about with him.

She's learning to assess how likely she is to get what she wants from the talk, and what could happen if she allows herself to be vulnerable with him.

Kaylee is considering whether she should bring up feeling sad about not having a dad when she was young, as seeing him with his other children brings this up for

her. She is scoring the level of risk that talking about this would hurt more than help her cope with these feelings.

RELATIONSHIP SAFETY ASSESSMENT

1 - DANGER 2 - RISKY 3 - SAFE

Physical Safety:

Kaylee's father has never physically abused Kaylee or her mom in any way. She has never felt afraid of him physically.

SCORE: 2.5

Emotional Safety:

Kaylee desperately wants her dad to love her and has opened up to him before, only to feel hurt by his inability to support or express love for her. She feels sad and rejected when this happens.

SCORE: 1

Relationship Safety:

Kaylee's relationship with her dad is tentative, at best. She still feels uncertain if he really loves her, or just feels sorry for her. She has learned before that he doesn't really talk about feelings.

SCORE: 1

Decision:

Based on this information, sharing her feelings with her dad right now could result in her feeling hurt or rejected, and it is unlikely to give her the support and reinforcement she wants. She's also afraid that if he feels that she's too needy or clingy, he will stop inviting her to visit.

Kaylee decided that it is in her best interest not to share her feelings with him at this time. As they get to know each other better, she may revisit the possibility.

“EMPATHY IS ABOUT **STANDING IN SOMEONE ELSE'S SHOES**, FEELING WITH HIS OR HER HEART, SEEING WITH HIS OR HER EYES.

NOT ONLY IS EMPATHY HARD TO OUTSOURCE AND AUTOMATE, BUT IT MAKES THE WORLD A **BETTER PLACE.**”

DANIEL H. PINK



EMPATHY AND COMPASSION

It is often said that empathy is compassion in action. In this sense, we're talking about empathy as a skill, not as a way of being. **Empathy is a way for us to express our compassion and relate to others on an emotional level.**

Brene Brown talks about empathy as being present for someone who needs to be heard, and allowing that person to express their emotions and thoughts without being told what to do, how to feel, or ways to stop their pain. Without being consoled or interrupted in any way.

Your Stuff and My Stuff

Empathy requires the ability to sit with our own feelings as they come up. As you express your feelings of sadness, I may

feel a lump in my throat, butterflies in my stomach, or a kick in the gut.

Emotions are experienced in the body, not the head where thoughts live. When emotions are translated by the mind into thoughts, they are expressed verbally as feelings.

Some would say that when I have those visceral experiences as you emote, I am feeling what you feel. They think and speak of empathy as an intuitive skill, absorbing the feelings of others around us. That is a separate discussion.

Here, we're saying that **your emotional expression reminds me of my own experience of similar feelings**. You feel what you feel, and I feel what I feel based on my own emotional experience of past situations.

Boundaries

Boundaries are critical. It's not our business to take on the pain of others (if that is possible). **When we try to 'make people feel better' we often do so because our own vulnerability is too difficult to sit with.**

We interrupt their emotional flow to make ourselves feel better - not them.

By doing so, even if we don't realize or intend it, **we may inadvertently send the message that we want them to stop - that they're making us feel uncomfortable.** When that happens, they may not have the opportunity to 'go there' again - to complete the work of processing those emotions by expressing them openly.

Being aware of what is your stuff and what is their stuff is the beginning of healthy

boundaries and relationships. Being able to label it and work it out later takes practice.

Turn Down the Intensity of Your Emotional Reactions

There's a way to turn down the intensity of your emotions without totally disconnecting.

Try these techniques when you recognize that your emotions are becoming too intense:

1. **Breathe.** Focus on your normal breathing – in and out, in and out.
2. **Shift your body.** Straighten up in your chair, pull your shoulders back, or change your position.

3. **Look away briefly.** Look at a spot over their shoulder, or glance down or to the side, but not in a distracted way.
4. **Use your sense of touch.** Touch the fabric on your shirttail, silently touch your fingers, gently sway a bit, or twist your ring a few times - whatever works.
5. **Name your feelings.** Identify the feelings you experience and make a mental note to return to them at an appropriate time.
6. **Remind yourself. Your focus at this time is on the other person.**
7. **Notice other sensations briefly.** What do you hear in the background? What do you see around you?

Then, reconnect at a lower intensity.
Repeat as needed.

Mindfulness

To connect with another person, to sit with them as they express their vulnerability, we must stay in the present moment.

In the present we're aware of our senses - what we see, hear, feel, taste, and smell. We're aware of all these things that are happening around us simultaneously.

When we tune in to someone's story, we hear what they say, think about and process the information, and sense the emotions they express. Our attention is on them.

Feeling/Sensing

Empathy is about emotional connection. It is choosing to sit with the emotional memories that come up when you connect with this person, rather than drift away into your own thoughts.

Thinking

If we allow ourselves to think about our own feelings as they come up, we shift our focus from them to ourselves. At that point, we're no longer connecting with the other person. We're lost in our own thoughts.

In essence, your mind has 'left the building' and drifted away. The emotional connection is broken. You're lost in your own stuff.

Returning to the Present

Thinking is normal. You'll find your mind drifting throughout the day multiple times. This isn't bad. Your mind is just doing what the mind does.

Simply refocus your attention on your senses. What do you hear? See? Feel? Taste? Smell?

Take a couple of breaths. Shift your body a bit to align your mind and emotions again.

Reconnect.

Verbal Expression of Empathy

When it's the right time, without interrupting the emotional flow, say what's in your heart. **Verbally expressing empathy is about authentic**

communication. The words aren't as important as the intent.

A 22-year-old I know says, "That's so messed up!" to express empathy. She gets it. She hates it. She hates that I must go through it.

Later, when your friend has moved forward, you may have the chance to talk about what you experienced while she or he was talking.

That type of reciprocity is authentic connection.

CONSCIOUS EMOTIONAL RISKS

Intimacy is complicated. It doesn't work in a one-sided relationship. **Reciprocity - the emotional give and take - is required.** Not everyone can or will connect authentically.

Learning when it is safe to be open and honest with those you care about requires forethought and trust, as well as emotional support for when it doesn't go well.

Taking emotional risks to share intimately leaves you open and feeling vulnerable. That can result in a very fulfilling and healing experience in the right relationship. It can result in feeling hurt, rejected, and abandoned in the wrong one.

Sometimes, taking the risk seems worth it. It may give you the resolution you seek, one way or the other. This is especially

true when physical and emotional safety are present, but relationship safety is in question.

Follow your gut in those cases. It may allow you to move on to healthier relationships.

If you have a pattern of unhealthy relationships - particularly those with emotionally and/or physically unsafe people (romantic or otherwise) - find someone to talk to about this. It may enhance all your relationships and help you to choose people who are able to connect authentically when you are ready.

Authentic connections are fabulous! They enhance your life and help you to feel fulfilled. Practice connecting on an authentic level whenever you can, and soon, this skill will come to you naturally. It will serve you well to build and strengthen your relationships with those around you.