



Connect Up

*A Self-Expression
Workbook for Teens*

By
The Digging Deep Project

With
Kristi Pikiewicz, PhD

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Disclaimer: This workbook is not a substitute for professional
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About This Workbook

This book is a space to figure out how you show up with others—and how you want to.

Being social isn't about being the loudest, funniest, or most confident person in the room. It's about feeling comfortable being yourself, knowing how to connect, and building relationships that actually feel good to be in.

That's what this book is about.

Inside, you'll explore how you relate, naturally, and your patterns of connecting with others. You'll practice what it means to build real friendships – not just fitting in, but actually belonging. And just as important, you'll learn how to set boundaries so you don't lose yourself along the way.

This isn't a rulebook. There's no "right" personality you're supposed to have. Instead, this workbook helps you experiment, reflect, and notice what works for you. Some exercises might feel easy. Others might feel uncomfortable. That's part of it. Growth usually lives just outside your comfort zone.

Just be honest with yourself. At the end of the day, this book isn't about changing who you are. It's about helping you connect as who you are—and find people who meet you there.

Section 1



Finding Your Social Energy

Understanding yourself before connecting with others

Before you can really connect with other people, it helps to understand what's going on inside you.

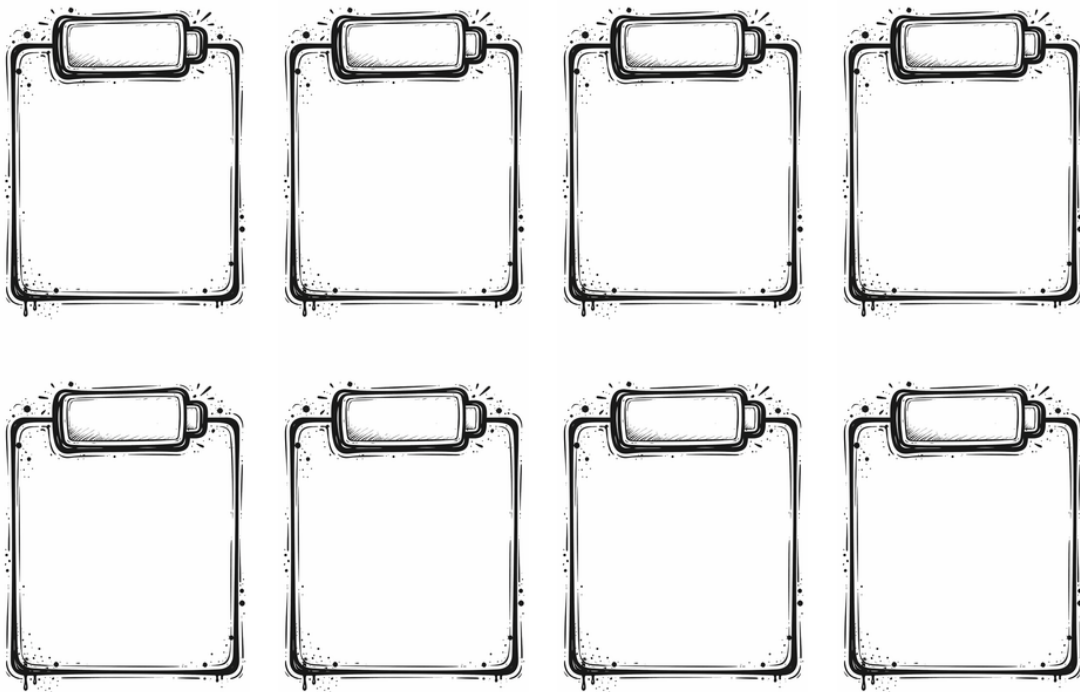
Everyone has a different kind of social energy. Some people feel energized by being around others. Some people enjoy it for a while and then need time alone to reset. Some people feel drained quickly, or anxious, or unsure of what to say. None of these are “wrong” – they’re just different starting points.

This section is about noticing your patterns. When do you feel most like yourself? When do you shut down, overthink, or try to be someone else? What kinds of conversations feel natural, and which ones feel forced?

Understanding your social energy is like learning the controls before playing the game. Once you know how you work, everything else – conversations, friendships, confidence – starts to feel more possible.

Track Your Social Battery

Track your energy before, during, and after different social situations. Maybe check in with yourself after a school lunch, or 1-on-1 conversation, or sport/activity. Describe the social situation and fill in a battery to show how “energized” you are after these interactions. Notice what fills you up and what drains you. Over time, patterns will start to emerge.



Side Quest

What do you notice about the social situations that give you energy or make you feel drained?

Alone vs. Together Self

Reflect on who you are when you're alone versus when you're around others. Where do you shrink, expand, or perform? This exercise helps you gently notice where your authentic self shifts in social spaces.



Side Quest

Act out both versions physically – feel the difference in your body. How do you present yourself when you are alone? How do you present yourself when you are with others? Does one feel more natural or comfortable? How do these differences feel in your body?

Moments I Felt Seen

Recall times when you felt truly understood by someone. What made those moments different from everyday interactions? Did you feel seen by a group of people or by one person? Were you seen for actions or for something else? Do you feel seen by peers or by mentors, parents, teachers or coaches? Use this space to describe these times you felt seen.

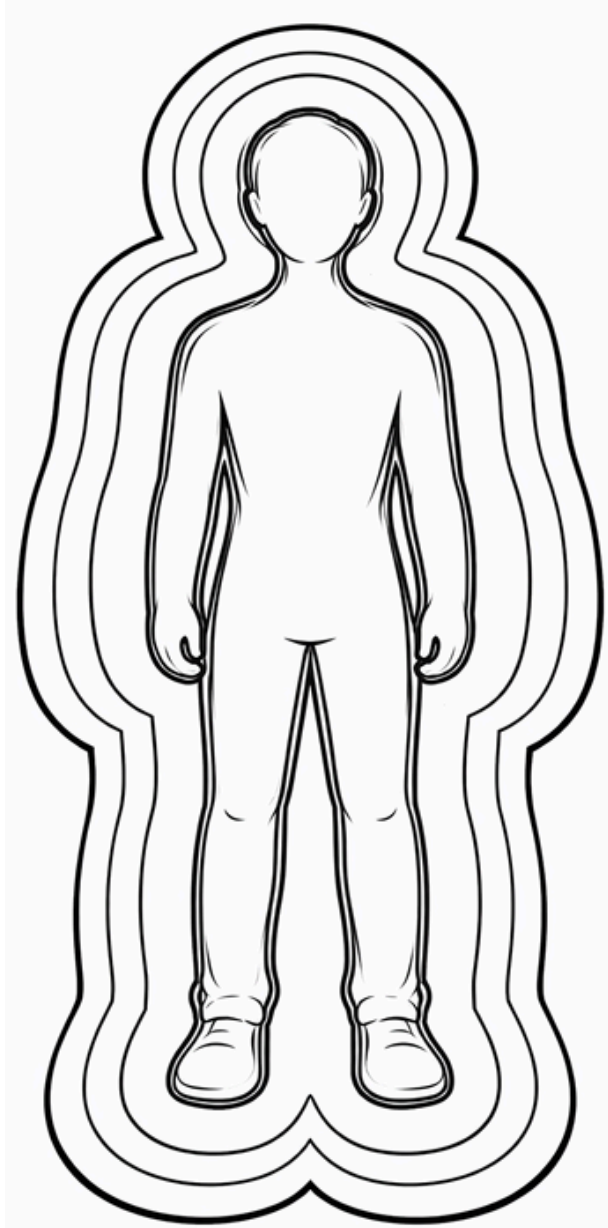
A 2x2 grid of writing boxes with decorative borders. The top-left box has a cloud, stars, and an arrow. The top-right box has stars, a lightning bolt, and a jagged line. The bottom-left box has a paint palette and brush. The bottom-right box has a broken heart, headphones, a paper airplane, and a water bottle.

Side Quest

Write or draw a short movie "scene" about being seen.

Your Social Identity Layers

Think about the different “roles” you play (friend, student, sibling, musician, athlete, creator, etc.). List these roles and then draw arrows to show which “layer” of yourself they belong to. Which roles feel “central” and which feel more on the surface?



What I Bring to a Group

Reflect on the energy you naturally bring into groups. Are you observant, playful, grounding, curious? Circle at least three social traits. This builds awareness of your social presence.

Observant Playful **Grounding** Curious
Attentive Empathetic Assertive Patient **Warm**
Approachable Reflective **Expressive** Thoughtful
Supportive **Encouraging** **Confident** Humble Open-minded
Engaging Adaptable Inclusive Respectful **Honest** Trustweec
Trustworthy Loyal Generous Kind Compassionate Loyal
Generous Kind **Compassionate** Receptive Present Insightful
Intuitive Calm Steady Lighthearted Playfully **sarcastic**
Direct Diplomatic Tactful Curious-listener Deep-thinking
Big-picture oriented Detail-aware Collaborative Independent
Reliable **Flexible** **Courageous** Vulnerable Authentic
Self-aware Peacemaker Motivating Honest-but-kind Sincere

Side Quest

List two of your social traits you see as positive and two that you see as negative. They can be from this list or you can pick your own!

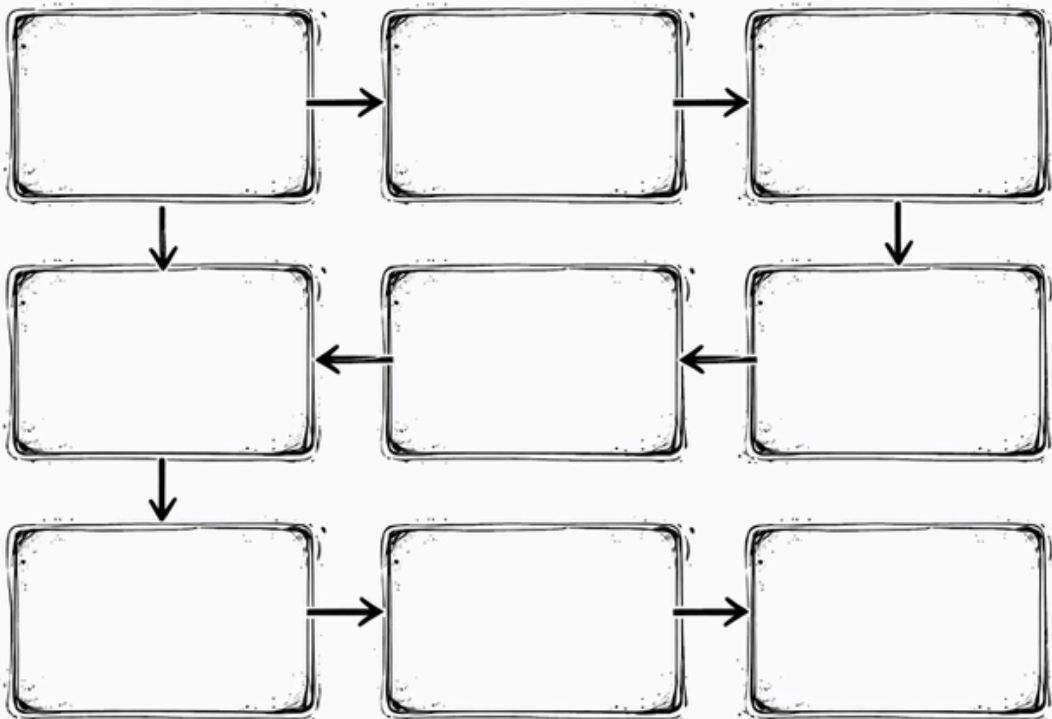
The Horror! The Horror!

We all have things we fear – tripping on the stage at graduation, falling asleep and drooling on your desk in math class, being photographed picking your nose, etc. Illustrate your worst-case social scenarios. They can be funny, horrifying, or a mix of both. Sometimes just shining light on something can reduce its power.



Social Utopia

What does the perfect day look like? If you could be anywhere and do anything with anyone, what would it look like? Sketch out the scenes of your perfect day.



Side Quest

If you had to pick ONE of these scenes to be reality, which would it be? Why?

Fit In vs. Belong

With work, you might be able to “fit in” many places. But where do you truly *belong*? Write about or draw social situations where you can fit in – with effort. And also write/draw situations where you feel you just naturally belong.

Fit in



Belong

Fit in



Belong

Fit in



Belong

Section 2



Starting & Building Conversations

Learning how to reach out & engage

Starting a conversation can feel like the hardest part. What do you say? When do you jump in? What if it's awkward?

Here's the truth: most conversations are a little awkward at first. That doesn't mean you're doing it wrong – it just means you're human.

This section is about taking that first step and then learning how to keep things going. You'll practice simple ways to start conversations, ask questions that actually lead somewhere, and respond in a way that shows you're really listening.

When you're curious, present, and willing to engage, conversations start to feel less like a performance and more like a shared experience.

Conversation Starters

It's soooooo hard to start doing homework. But have you noticed that once you get going, it's easier? Conversations can be like that. Often, getting started is the hardest part. There are many ways to start a conversation – and many situations that lend themselves to conversations. Here are some situations with conversation starters to get you, well...started. Read the examples and then list your own!

A shared situation

Wow, is it always like this or just today?

Observing something

Nice shoes – they new?

Likes/Dislikes

D'you hear [that musician] just dropped a new track?

Asking for help

Wait, when is that thing due, again?

Curiosity Over Cleverness

Next time you're in a conversation, focus on asking genuine questions instead of trying to sound interesting. In fact, as much as possible try to **ONLY** ask questions. As someone is speaking, listen closely for something you would like to know more about. Here's the hard part: Keep that question in your mind until it's the right time to ask! Come back here to list your wins – what genuine questions did you ask?



The One-Word Conversation Ender

One trick when asking questions in a conversation is to look a layer deeper than the one-word answer. When you ask, “How was your weekend,” and someone says, “Good,” that’s kind of the end. Or when you ask “Do you like that class,” and the answer is “It’s okay,” the conversation doesn’t go very far. Practice transforming these questions with one-word responses in questions that ask for more.

One-word questions	One step deeper
How was your weekend? -----	What was the best part of your weekend? -----
Do you like that class? -----	What did you like or hate about the class? -----
How are you? -----	-----
Did you finish the homework? -----	-----
You doing anything after school? -----	-----
What did you get on the test? -----	-----
Did you have a good weekend? -----	-----

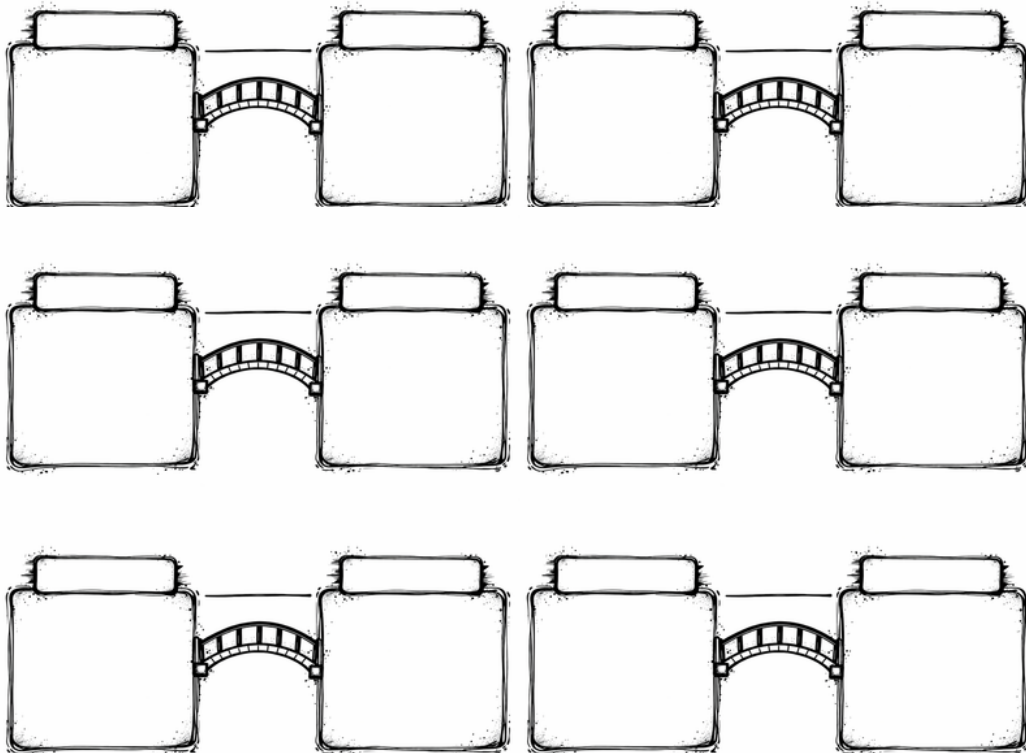
Side Quest

Keep an eye on your conversations. List a question you said or heard that make the conversation go flat. Then list what you or the speaker could have asked to keep it going:

Conversation Bridges

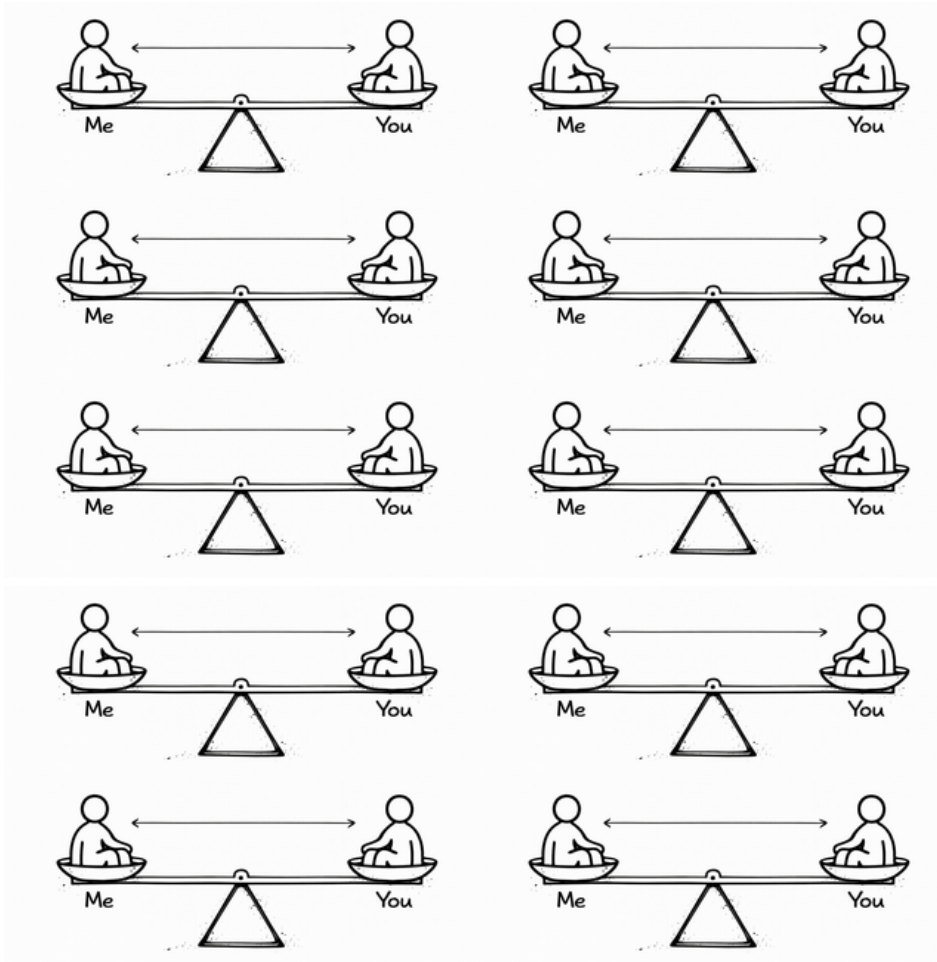
Conversations often start somewhere and lead to to another place. Practice “bridging” from one topic to the next. Here’s how:

1. Pick a topic you would like to talk about (especially if it’s cat memes). List it in the ribbon above the first box and then in the box, write one interesting thing you could say or ask about it.
2. Pick a second, unrelated topic and write it in the ribbon above the second box (maybe it’s the history of Manga). Again, write one thing you could say or ask.
3. Now it’s time to try hard: Write a phrase on the bridge that could lead you from the first topic to the second one. (Being





The 50/50 Flow

Some people talk too much when they're nervous, others go quiet, and many people bounce between the two. This exercise is about noticing your natural rhythm and learning how to adjust it so conversations feel more balanced and real. Keep track of your next 10 conversations. Who talked more – you or the other person? On each scale, draw an arrow between the two of you to show who talked more. Notice the patterns!





Listen to Notice



Being present in a conversation isn't just about hearing words – it's about receiving the moment. Often, part of your mind drifts: replaying something you said, planning your next response, or getting distracted by everything around you. In your next few interactions, challenge yourself to notice 3 small details about the other person – something they said, how they said it, or something about their energy or expression. Afterward, write down what you noticed. Were these things you normally would have missed? Did paying attention change how connected you felt?

 Observations 



1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
- _____

 Observations 



1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
- _____

 Observations 



1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
- _____

 Observations 

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
- _____

 Observations 

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
- _____

 Observations 

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
- _____

Section 3



Deepening Connection & Reading Others

Moving beyond surface level interactions

At some point, conversations can start to feel repetitive. Same questions, same answers, same surface-level exchanges. You might talk to people every day but still feel like you're not really connecting. That's because real connection doesn't just come from talking more. It comes from understanding more.

This section is about learning to tune in. Not just to what people say, but to how they say it – the tone, the pauses, the energy behind their words. It's about noticing what's beneath the surface: emotions, signals, and unspoken needs.

At the same time, this section helps you understand your own patterns in connection. Who do you open up to? Who do you hold back from? What makes you feel safe—or unsure? As you build awareness of others, you'll also build awareness of yourself.

And By That You Mean...?

As Led Zeppelin knows, sometimes *words have two meanings*. Read the following phrases and then write TWO ways they could be interpreted.

You're brave for wearing that

INTERPRETATION #1

INTERPRETATION #2

Whatever works for you

INTERPRETATION #1

INTERPRETATION #2

We should hang out sometime

INTERPRETATION #1

INTERPRETATION #2

That's very you

INTERPRETATION #1

INTERPRETATION #2

It's not a big deal

INTERPRETATION #1

INTERPRETATION #2

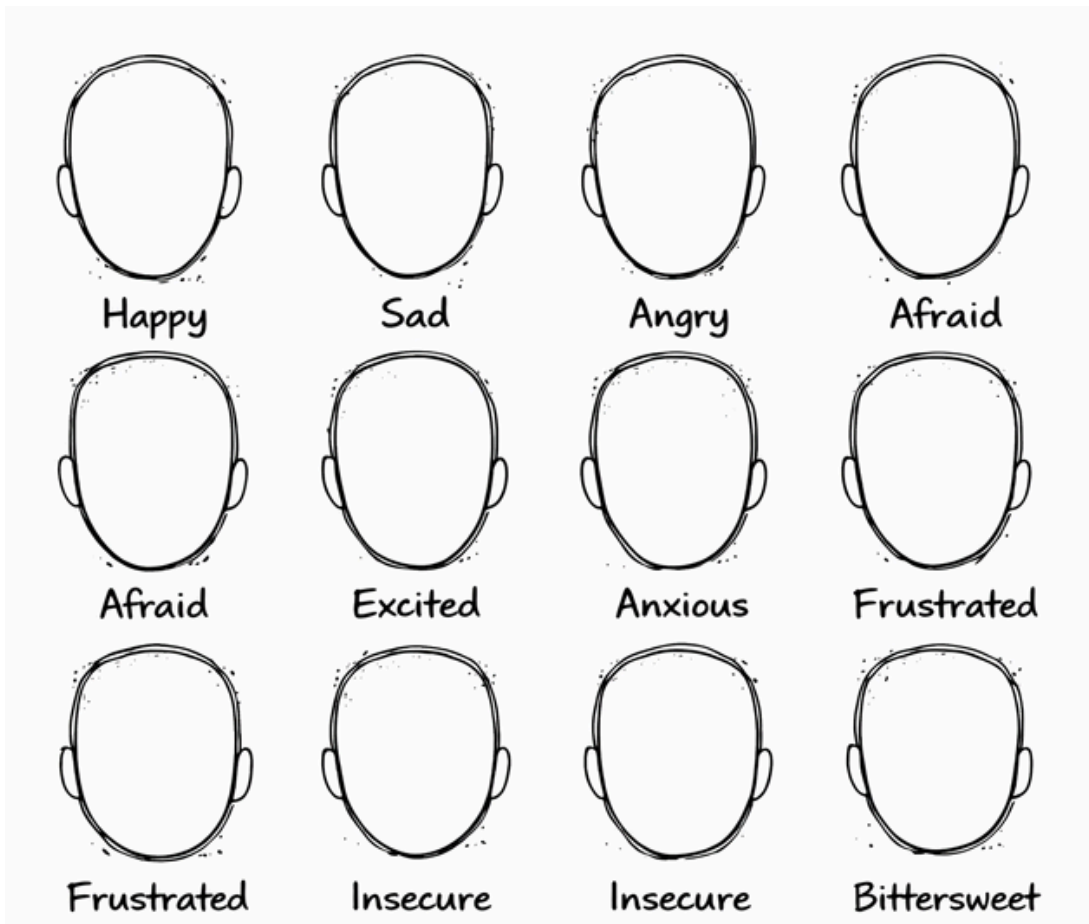
You're actually really funny

INTERPRETATION #1

INTERPRETATION #2

Your-Moticons

We all know about emoticons – now is your chance to make your own. Illustrate these faces to show the listed emotions. Note: They get harder as you go!



Side Quest

Find a trusted conversation partner. Be prepared: You're probably going to laugh at each other. Think of an emotion. Make the face. And see if your partner can guess the emotion. Yes, this is stupid. As long as you're both okay with it, it'll be awesome.

More-Moticons

Now let's do the reverse of the previous page. Match the listed emotions to the correct faces.

			Confused
			Disgusted
			Embarrassed
			Guilty
			Bored
			Jealous
			Overwhelmed
			Surprised
			Proud

Side Quest

For each of these faces, write *another* emotion that would fit – or at least be close! For example, “Bored” might also look “Tired.”

What People Need

Think about people you know. They can be people your own age, or they could be younger/older. Use one sentence to describe each person. Then use one sentence to describe what this person needs – for example, “This person needs to be the center of attention,” or, “This person needs to fly under the radar.”



This person is...

This person needs...



This person is...

This person needs...



This person is...

This person needs...



This person is...

This person needs...



This person is...

This person needs...



This person is...

This person needs...

Guessing Emotions

In your conversations this week, quietly guess what the other person might be feeling based on their tone and body language. This isn't about "reading minds," it's about practicing empathy. The more you tune into others, the more you'll start to understand what people need, even when they don't say it directly. List who you spoke with, when you spoke, and what you talked about – then guess what they were feeling!

Who? _____
When? _____
What? _____
Emotion: _____

Who? _____
When? _____
What? _____
Emotion: _____

Side Quest

If it feels natural, gently check your guess by responding to it – something like, "That sounds frustrating," or "You seem really happy about that."
Notice what happens. Were you close? Did they open up more?

Honesty vs. People Pleasing

Honestly, that haircut isn't doing your friend any favors. But you can't just say it, can you? Think of people you know – you don't have to list them by name on this page! Think of things they probably need to hear. Write the blunt/honest version and then write the nice/fake version. Somewhere between these two might be a way to actually say what needs to be said.

The blunt/honest version...

The blunt/honest version...

The nice/fake version...

The nice/fake version...

The blunt/honest version...

The blunt/honest version...

The nice/fake version...

The nice/fake version...

Following the Thread

In most conversations, people drop small “threads” – little hints about what matters to them. It might be something they mention quickly, a detail they repeat, or a topic their energy shifts around. Deep connection often comes from noticing these threads and choosing to gently follow them.

Think about a recent conversation. Write down 2–3 things the other person mentioned that could have been explored more. Maybe they said, “I’ve been really busy lately,” or “I’m kind of stressed about something,” or even “I’ve been getting into music again.” Now ask yourself: what might have been underneath that? What could you have followed up on?

Next, rewrite that moment with a “thread-following” response. For example:

- “Busy how?”
- “What’s been stressing you out?”
- “What kind of music?”

The image shows two identical worksheet templates arranged vertically. Each template consists of two rounded rectangular boxes. The left box is titled "The thread" and contains five horizontal lines for writing. The right box is titled "My follow-up" and also contains five horizontal lines. A dashed line connects the two boxes, with a drawing of a needle and thread passing through it, symbolizing the concept of following a thread.

Yo, Why Bring Negativity?

Sometimes negative comments slip out without much thought—judging someone’s behavior, complaining about what they did, or joining in when others are talking negatively. It can feel automatic, like part of the social flow. This exercise is about noticing that moment and choosing a different direction. See if you can catch yourself slipping into negativity. When you do, come back here to list what you said. Then write a positive alternative.

The negative thing I said _____ _____ _____ _____	The positive thing I could have said _____ _____ _____ _____
The negative thing I said _____ _____ _____ _____	The positive thing I could have said _____ _____ _____ _____
The negative thing I said _____ _____ _____ _____	The positive thing I could have said _____ _____ _____ _____

Repeat & Expand

This might sound like a trick...but it's also a trick that works! In your next interaction, listen for something the other person says that feels important. Then repeat a small part of it and gently expand it into a follow-up. For example: "You said you've been tired a lot—what's been going on?" or "You mentioned that app—what do you like about it?" Here's a chance to practice. Pretend this speech is one of your friends. Then list how you would repeat and ask them to expand on things.

Okay so I tried getting into a show again last night because everyone keeps saying it gets better after a few episodes, and like... it is' kind of good, but I got distracted halfway through and ended up scrolling instead. I feel like I do that with everything now. But the vibe was cool, and the music especially stood out.

Speaking of music, I've been listening to the same few songs on repeat lately. I don't even know why- they just clicked. It kind of helps when I'm doing homework, or at least makes it a little less painful.

Also I saw highlights from a big game recently, even though I didn't watch it live, and now I feel like I did. The ending looked pretty intense though- I wish I'd seen it when it was happening because everyone was talking about it. And yeah, school has been... school, I have a test coming up that I should be studying for, but I don't totally get you really don't. My brain just got of jumps between all of this - shows, music, random stuff.

Repeat and expand:

Repeat and expand:

Repeat and expand:

Section 4



Boundaries, Belonging & Being Yourself

Balancing connection with authenticity

As you get better at connecting with others, a new challenge shows up: how do you stay yourself while also being part of a group? It's easy to start shaping who you are based on what feels accepted—laughing when others laugh, agreeing when you're unsure, going along with things that don't fully feel right. Sometimes you don't even notice it happening.

This section is about finding that balance. You'll explore what it means to say yes when you mean yes—and no when you mean no. You'll notice the moments where you feel pulled to please others, and the moments where you feel most grounded in who you are. This awareness helps you build relationships that feel steady, not stressful. It's to find the spaces where you can show up honestly and still feel connected. That's where real relationships live.

Authenticity Monitor

Every interaction is a chance to notice how you connect with others. Don't fill this page out all at once! After a conversation or a social situation, return here to reflect on the interaction. How did you express who you are and how did you change your appearance or how you act to fit the situation?

<p>Social situation</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<p>How I was myself</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<p>Social situation</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<p>How I was myself</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<p>What I changed</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<p>What I changed</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
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The Shape of Your “Yes”

Close your eyes and imagine saying “yes” to something you don’t actually want to do. Where do you feel it in your body – tight chest, heavy stomach, shallow breath? Now imagine a true “yes.” Notice the difference in sensation, energy, and ease. Sometimes your body knows your boundaries before your thoughts catch up. List the “Yes...but no decisions” and illustrate how you feel them in your body. Then do the same for “Yes...really”. Next time you have an iffy decision, check in with your body as well as with your mind.

Yes...but no



Yes... really



The Unsaid Conversation

Think of something you've wanted to say to a friend but haven't. Maybe it's appreciation, frustration, or a boundary. Write what you would like to say, completely honest but still respectful. You don't need to list the person. But it's good to know who you're thinking of.

Things I know I should say
but haven't yet... ♡

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____


5. _____

6. _____

Friendship Flags

Healthy friendships aren't perfect, but they feel steady, mutual, and real. They don't require you to shrink, perform, or constantly question your worth. If you look closely, you can see hints about what kinds of friends people are. Over the next few days, watch how friends interact with each other – not just your own friends, but other pairs and groups. What green flags do you see? What red flags do you see?

 Green flags

 Red flags

Side Quest

What friendship green and red flags do you see in yourself? What traits do you think draw people to you, and what makes you hard to deal with sometimes?

The “Small Truths” Practice

Instead of trying to be fully open all at once, practice sharing small, honest thoughts. These are low-risk but real – like saying you don’t actually like the stupid movie your friends like, or admitting that you kind of like math class. How many small truths can you find? You might surprise yourself by how many things you like that you think your friends don’t. (You might also be surprised by how many people agree...)

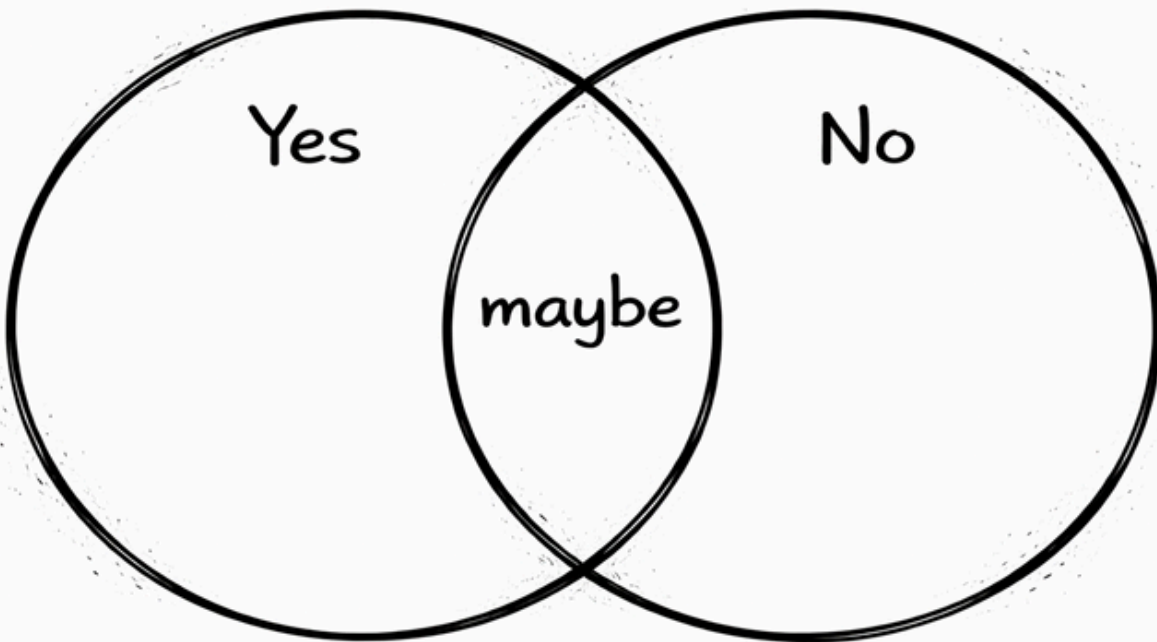


Side Quest

Pick one to actually share. Can you do it? Journal your results here:

Yes, No, Maybe

Think about different social situations – being invited somewhere, helping a friend, going along with a group decision. If you can think of REAL situations, great. If not, think about what might happen. For each one, write whether it feels like a clear yes, a clear no, or a maybe. Notice where you feel pressure to say yes even when it's not true for you.



The Belonging Experiment

Get ready to be your worst self. Actually, not your “worst” self, but your most authentic self. Don’t worry: It’s just one day. You can go back to pretending tomorrow. For one day, intentionally don’t try to impress, entertain, or adapt yourself for others. Just show up as you are. It might suck. (It probably will suck.) Don’t be a “big deal” about it. Just quietly exist as your core self. Notice what happens. Do people respond differently? Use this blank space to journal or draw the experience. Fill this space with weird thoughts, colors, and ideas.

The Push/Pull Reflection

Think about a time you wanted to be closer to someone but also felt yourself holding back. What were the two forces inside you – wanting connection but also protecting yourself? Write both sides as if they're voices having a conversation. On the left, you want to be closer. What do you say? On the right, you want distance? What do your words look like? If you need more space, use the margins.

✘ further

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

✔ closer

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

About The Authors

About the Digging Deep Project

The Digging Deep Project was founded by philanthropist Sheri Sobrato as a way to provide emotional support for young people going through tough times. She was inspired to create this project because she discovered so much about her emotions and herself during her own personal challenge with cancer as a young adult.

The Project began its journey with the journaling book *Digging Deep: A Journal for Young People Facing Health Challenges* by Rose Offner, MFA and Sheri Sobrato, MA (Resonance House, 2014), followed by the mobile self-help app, *Shadow's Edge*, and now continues with this workbook. Parents, teachers and caregivers can find resources at www.diggingdeep.org or join our community at [Facebook.com/DiggingDeepProject](https://www.facebook.com/DiggingDeepProject).

About Kristi Pikiwicz, PhD

Dr. Pikiwicz earned her PhD in Clinical Psychology at Pacifica Graduate Institute in Carpinteria, CA. She completed pre-doctoral training at the Nan Tolbert Nurturing Center in Ojai, CA, and her post-doctoral internship at the Boulder Institute for Psychotherapy and Research. She currently provides remote and in-person educational assessment and counseling through Clover Learning Center (cloverlearningcenter.com). Previously, Kristi designed and delivered a social-emotional learning curriculum for a K-8 school in Boulder, CO with a mission for gifted education, and spent eight years as a middle school language arts and social studies teacher. In addition to her mental health training, Kristi holds a B.S. in environmental science from Allegheny College and a teaching credential from Western Washington University.