

WORKBOOK

BUILDING STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

Exercises for getting to know your relationship style,
maintaining healthy boundaries and building lasting connections



A photograph of three people from behind, looking out at a calm ocean under a large, bright full moon in a dark sky. The scene is romantic and serene.

Welcome!

Happy Valentine's Day, HOEMies! This Valentine's Day, we wanted to focus on helping you build strong relationships, and when we say relationships, we don't just mean romantic ones! Close friendships require the same knowledge, understanding and effort to make them work.

When we think of healthy relationships, we often think of the practical skills we need like active listening and resolving conflicts, which are important! But if we really want to change the way we look at relationships, we have to work on them from the inside out. What does that mean? It means getting to know ourselves, our relationship patterns, our relationship triggers, and how our past plays out in our current relationships.

With this in mind, in this workbook, you'll be asked to reflect on relationships that are important to you, relationships with parents and guardians, and what might cause you to act the way you do in present-day relationships.

Ready to get started? Let's go!



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Your Attachment Style

When we talk about attachment, we are referring to the quality of our close relationships, and how we feel and behave in these bonds with others. This attachment style may not be noticeable in our more casual relationships, but can be more apparent when we start becoming emotionally close to someone, whether that is a friend or romantic relationship. There is NO right or wrong attachment style, and all styles are VERY common. Nobody has one attachment style 100% of the time. It can be mixed, and can show up differently depending on who you are with.

Often, our attachment style stems from childhood and whether the bonds with our primary caretakers felt secure and safe. It's important to know that this is not always the case. Attachment styles can also develop from other significant relationships throughout our lives.

Read the descriptions on the next page to see which style describes you best. Then we will look at tools for each of these attachment styles to improve your relationships today.



Your Attachment Style

Secure Attachment

- Doesn't experience a lot of anxiety about the relationship
- Feels trusting and welcomes affection openly
- Doesn't take misunderstandings too seriously
- Able to confront conflicts directly without being passive, aggressive, or passive-aggressive
- Maintains healthy boundaries
- Able to work through problems cooperatively

Anxious Attachment

- Has a strong desire to be close to others and can experience intimacy
- Has a sensitive nervous system, which can cause significant distress during conflict
- Can experience jealousy toward their friend / partner's other relationships
- Worries consistently about the stability of the relationship
- Consistently seeks reassurance

Avoidant Attachment

- Prefers independence over intimacy
- Avoids commitment
- Doesn't like sharing deep feelings
- Often focuses on partner's flaws
- Often becomes distant in relationships
- Tends to dismiss the feelings of others
- Fears being seen as too needy or dependent
- Withdraws during conflict

Fearful-Avoidant Attachment

- Often has a negative view of others as well as themselves
- Finds intimacy and trust difficult
- Displays a lack of empathy in relationships
- Emotional reactions are either very "hot" or "cold"
- Deeply fears rejection
- Has trouble maintaining boundaries
- Lacks coping strategies for stress and conflict

Write the top 5 qualities that describe you best *most* of the time:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Learning More About Your Attachment

What did you learn from your family about expressing emotions?

What are some of the main values regarding relationships within your culture?

How did you receive comfort from others growing up?

How do you like to receive comfort from others now?

Learning More About Your Attachment

What is your gut reaction when your partner / friend is upset? Do you shut down or want to engage more?

How do you show love to others?

What makes you the most distressed in friendships and relationships?

Why do your friendships / relationships usually end?

Strategies For Your Style

Note: While the goal may be to foster secure attachments within our relationships, even securely attached relationships go through times of anxiety, avoidance, and fearful-avoidance, so these tips apply to everyone!

ANXIOUS

Recognize that your sensitivity is nothing to be ashamed of. Spend time reflecting on where it may have stemmed from and remember to be gentle with yourself. You may want to go through this process with the help of a therapist. When you encounter difficult situations with friends or partners, take a step back and breathe before reacting with anxiety or anger. Your initial reaction may not be the best one! Learn to name your feelings when they arise to create a bit of distance between yourself and the feeling before reacting. Practice mindfulness and meditation to learn how to sit with uncomfortable feelings in the moment. Replaying arguments in your head will only make you more anxious. Try strategies for distracting yourself in those moments so you can step away and come back to it later.

AVOIDANT

If a conflict comes up with your friend or partner, take a moment to reflect on it and encourage yourself to discuss it instead of running away. Learn to name your emotions as they arise and express these to your friend or partner. It may not feel like it from your life experience, but they want to hear how you are feeling! Challenge yourself to say “yes” to the next few opportunities that arise for you to experience something outside your comfort zone with a friend or partner. When your gut reaction is to do something independently or solve a problem independently, try thinking of it as “us against the problem” instead of “me against the problem”. Make a list of all the people in your life that you can lean on during hard times.

FEARFUL-AVOIDANT

Though you desire intimacy, you may be afraid of it. Try to encourage yourself to open up about your feelings, but don't push it too hard. This can be tough! Be gentle with yourself. Create a list of positive affirmations reminding yourself about why you are worthy of a loving relationship, because you are. Try to vocalize your boundaries to the people you care about. Tell them about what feels safe and unsafe for you. This will help them to support you in a way that feels good. Help your friend or partner understand what you need during tough times. They may be able to gently nudge you in the right direction. A therapist can help facilitate these conversations and help you learn more about your attachment history.

Types of Boundaries

Personal boundaries define the limits we set in a relationship. Different people have different boundaries, which can depend on our values, culture, upbringing and social circle.

You may need to establish certain boundaries with some people and conflicting boundaries with another person. Below are common examples of personal boundaries:

1. **Physical boundaries** secure your space and body, to have privacy, and to be able to meet your own physical needs.
2. **Sexual boundaries** secure your right to consent and open, honest communication regarding sexuality.
3. **Emotional or mental boundaries** secure your right to not having your emotions and thoughts ridiculed and not having to take on other people's emotions when you are not feeling ready.
4. **Spiritual or religious boundaries** respect your right to hold your own beliefs and practice them accordingly.
5. **Financial or material boundaries** secure your resources and possessions and allow you to use them as you choose.
6. **Time boundaries** secure how you spend your time and allow you to make choices about when and where you spend your energy.



Boundary Styles

There are three different boundary styles that can be applied to all different types of boundaries. Check off how many of the following statements you relate to. And remember, all boundary styles are common, natural and vary depending on the relationships we are in.

Weak Boundaries

- ☐ Overly trusting of others
- ☐ Overshares personal information
- ☐ Has difficulty saying “no” to others
- ☐ Almost too involved in others’ problems
- ☐ Avoids conflict by giving in to others
- ☐ Dependent on opinions of others
- ☐ Communicates passively



Healthy Boundaries

- ☐ Takes appropriate time to build trust with others
- ☐ Shares personal information in a balanced way
- ☐ Able to say “no” when needed
- ☐ Supports others while maintaining personal needs
- ☐ Values both own and others’ opinions
- ☐ Engages in conflict productively
- ☐ Communicates assertively



Rigid Boundaries

- ☐ Avoids intimacy and closeness with others
- ☐ Very guarded with personal information
- ☐ Says “no” to others most of the time
- ☐ May seem detached from others
- ☐ Has few close relationships
- ☐ Has inflexible personal values
- ☐ Can seem argumentative



Establishing Boundaries

If you checked off most of the items in porous or rigid boundaries, try these simple strategies:

SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS FOR OTHERS AT THE BEGINNING OF CERTAIN SITUATIONS (E.G. GATHERINGS, EVENTS, NEW FRIENDSHIPS, ETC.) ABOUT WHAT IS ACCEPTABLE FOR YOU

TAKE TIME TO UNDERSTAND THE BOUNDARIES OF OTHERS. THIS WILL HELP YOU ESTABLISH YOUR OWN, AND WILL HELP YOU START TO APPRECIATE THE VALUES OF OTHERS

BE CONSISTENT. IF SOMETHING IS IMPORTANT TO YOU, STICK BY THAT. YOU DON'T NEED TO OFFER A LONG-WINDED EXPLANATION. JUST STAY FIRM, BUT KIND, AND TRUE TO YOURSELF.

Who do you struggle to set healthy boundaries with?

What types of boundaries (listed on page 6) do you struggle with most?

In your relationship with the person listed above, are your boundaries too porous, rigid or a combination? In what ways?

What are some specific actions you want to try to make your boundaries more balanced with this person?

Meaningful Communication

Take a minute to reflect ... how often in conversation are you either zoned out, feeling impatient, or waiting for a break in conversation to share your point? There's no shame - we all do it! But if you're looking to start creating some new, meaningful connections, it can help to learn how to go a little deeper in our conversations.

It can be daunting to worry about always having something interesting to say, but luckily, the tone of your voice and your body language are just as important, if not *more* important than the words you say. Sometimes, simply listening to someone's story can be much more valuable than sharing our thoughts or offering advice.

The trick to having an authentic conversation? Approach it from a place of curiosity and openness. Here are a few more tips for generating genuine connections and conversation with others:

1. Ask deeper, open-ended questions (suggestions on the next page)
2. Ask follow-up questions (how was that for you?; how did that feel?)
3. Try to focus fully on the person's words instead of your next thought
4. Share something about yourself that helps the other person learn more about you and encourages vulnerability
5. Avoid distractions and do your best to stay in the moment
6. Meaningful conversation can happen anywhere. Practice courage and try it with someone new!



36 Questions for Increasing Closeness

Want to start building a close bond with a new friend? Participants in a study were instructed to ask each other the following 36 questions. Pairs who completed this exercise felt closer, and these feelings of closeness continued well after the conversation. Some pairs even felt as close with their new friends as they did in their longest relationships.

To do this, set aside 45 minutes. For 15 minutes, take turns asking each other the questions in Set 1 below. Each person should answer each question, but in alternating order, so that a different person goes first each time. After 15 minutes, move onto Set 2, and after 15 minutes move onto Set 3, even if you haven't finished all of the questions. Each level increases in terms of the depth of the questions.

Set 1

1. Given the choice of anyone in the world, who would you want as a dinner guest?
2. Would you like to be famous? In what way?
3. Before making a telephone call, do you ever rehearse what you are going to say? Why?
4. What would constitute a "perfect" day for you?
5. When did you last sing to yourself? To someone else?
6. If you were able to live to the age of 90 and retain either the mind or body of a 30-year-old for the last 60 years of your life, which would you want?
7. Do you have a secret hunch about how you will die?
8. Name three things you and your partner appear to have in common.
9. For what in your life do you feel most grateful?
10. If you could change anything about the way you were raised, what would it be?
11. Take four minutes and tell your partner your life story in as much detail as possible.
12. If you could wake up tomorrow having gained any one quality or ability, what would it be?

36 Questions for Increasing Closeness

Set 2

13. If a crystal ball could tell you the truth about yourself, your life, the future, or anything else, what would you want to know?
14. Is there something that you've dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven't you done it?
15. What is the greatest accomplishment of your life?
16. What do you value most in a friendship?
17. What is your most treasured memory?
18. What is your most terrible memory?
19. If you knew that in one year you would die suddenly, would you change anything about the way you are now living? Why?
20. What does friendship mean to you?
21. What roles do love and affection play in your life?
22. Alternate sharing something you consider a positive characteristic of your partner. Share a total of five items.
23. How close and warm is your family? Do you feel your childhood was happier than most other people's?
24. How do you feel about your relationship with your mother?



36 Questions for Increasing Closeness

Set 3

25. Make three true “we” statements each. For instance, “We are both in this room feeling...”
26. Complete this sentence: “I wish I had someone with whom I could share...”
27. If you were going to become a close friend with your partner, please share what would be important for them to know.
28. Tell your partner what you like about them; be very honest this time, saying things that you might not say to someone you’ve just met.
29. Share with your partner an embarrassing moment in your life.
30. When did you last cry in front of another person? By yourself?
31. Tell your partner something that you like about them [already].
32. What, if anything, is too serious to be joked about?
33. If you were to die this evening with no opportunity to communicate with anyone, what would you most regret not having told someone? Why haven’t you told them yet?
34. Your house, containing everything you own, catches fire. After saving your loved ones and pets, you have time to safely make a final dash to save any one item. What would it be? Why?
35. Of all the people in your family, whose death would you find most disturbing? Why?
36. Share a personal problem and ask your partner’s advice on how they might handle it. Also, ask your partner to reflect back to you how you seem to be feeling about the problem you have chosen.

Source: Aron, Arthur et al.:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0146167297234003>



Thank you!

We hope you enjoyed this workbook and that it helped you learn a little bit more about yourself and your relationships.

Take care, HOEMies! <3

