



# RECONNECTIONS: THE STRENGTH OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS IN OUR LIVES

**PARTICIPANT GUIDE**



“What is a friend? A single soul dwelling in two bodies.”

– Aristotle

Group Purpose: The purpose of this group is to explore ways we can reconnect with family and friends in order to find support, joy and love.

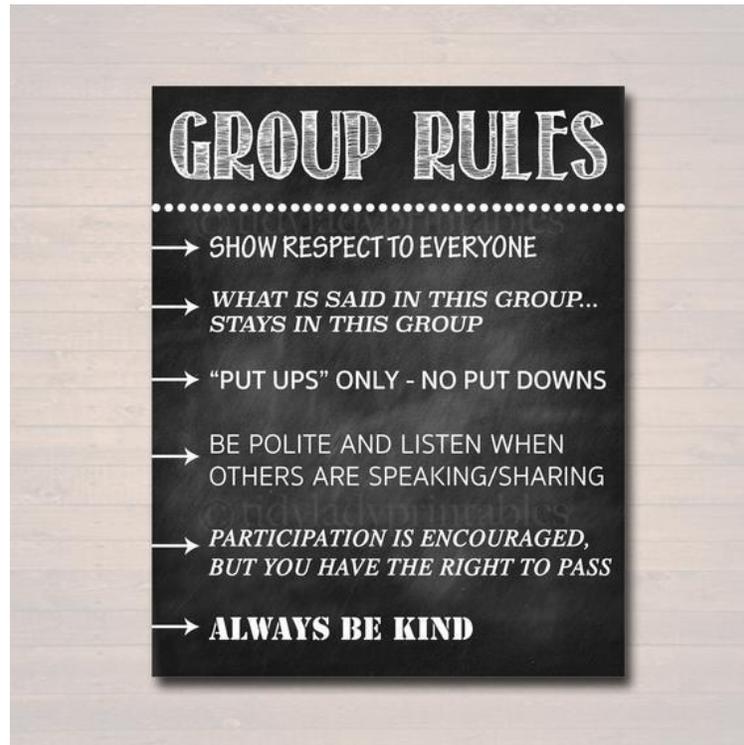
## Session 1: Introduction to course

### Welcome and Introductions

Throughout our time together, we will explore our past relationships and have discussions on why we experienced disconnect. This may bring up a lot of various feelings from anger, sadness, grief, even happiness. While we will always be sensitive to our feelings, we want to focus our energy on the purpose of this group – to reconnect with family and friends. We will focus on the skills of how to best do this. By focusing on the skills, we will make a conscious effort to move beyond the past and look towards the future.

In groups, there is always a combination of processing thoughts and feelings. We will do our best to do this. The very nature of groups is processing – we participate and learn and grow as a result. When we focus on the future, we are focusing on the outcome. What we will gain as we practice these skills in our personal life and find the reconnections we are looking for.

## Group Norms



Before we continue, we will create "group norms". This is another way to say "group rules". As you may know, every group begins this way.

- Can anyone share why groups create rules?

Groups create rules in order to accomplish the purpose of the group. In this case, the purpose of this group is to explore ways we can reconnect with family and friends in order to find support, joy and love. In order for us to accomplish this we need to work effectively together. We do this by creating a safe space for us to share without risk of judgement or shame.

## Exercise

Before we move onto the topic of our class, we will participate in a group exercise. These are important for many reasons. First, they help us to get to know each other a little better and become more comfortable with everyone. It also creates an atmosphere for learning and participation.

### **What's My Name?**

On name tags or similar labels, write down the name of a famous person, or write down people types (e.g. doctor, athlete, nerd, disabled, wealthy, homeless, etc.). Place these nametags on a team member's back so that they cannot see what they are, but the rest of the group can.

For a set amount of time, the entire group should mingle, and ask and answer questions. They should treat each other according to the stereotypical way based on what kind of person they have been labeled. Each team member can use that treatment, as well as the answers to questions, to figure out what the label is. As each team member figures out who they are, they can exit the game and let the rest continue.

**Purpose:** By confronting stereotypes in both how people treat us and in the questions and answers used, the team can get a better sense of how we mistakenly see people as well as how it feels to be so narrowly defined. This is a good ice-breaker activity regardless of whether the group members know each other well or not.

## introduction

There is love, joy, purpose, happiness, and tons of other feelings when we have people in our lives that care for us and whom we also care for. There's also pain and sorrow when those relationships break-up. We may feel betrayed, not understood, confused and lost. I would imagine some of you have felt one of some of these feelings.

This is a very powerful group and before we go on, I want to thank each and every one of you for having the courage, not just to join this group, but the courage to re-engage with family and/or friends with whom you have had a falling out in the past. There is much courage amongst us!

There is plenty of time for details later, but for now, let's wrap up our first session with a general discussion about the benefits of reconnecting with family and friends.

- How would your life be different once you have successfully reconnected?
- Without these people in our lives, how are you feeling? (isolated, lonely, something's missing in life, etc.)

## Session 2: Estrangement from family

Whether a person has a mental illness or not, there are times when family troubles cause a significant rift and the relationships crumble. We can guess that some of these troubles were caused by significant traumatic experiences or something more benign as a disagreement or falling-out.

As we continue in this class, we will each examine if the reconnection will be healthy and positive for you. Everything comes with risk – the risk of rejection for example. For without risk, there is no reward. Imagine yourself back in a healthy and happy relationship with your sister or brother, daughter or mother, aunt or niece, friend, etc. We will help you navigate those questions, if you even have them.

Many of us may find ourselves feeling lonely or longing for that relationship when we were happy and carefree. This is natural and healthy to want to have those relationships again. It gives us the strength to pursue this goal!

“Emotional Cutoff” is a term coined by Dr. Murray Bowen: “people managing their unresolved emotional issues with parents, siblings, other family members by reducing or totally cutting off emotional contact with them in order to reduce anxiety”.

It’s natural, almost critical, for us to “emotionally cutoff” when we’ve experienced emotional issues in order for us not to be bogged down by the weight of that stress. It’s healthy to want to move forward and live, be productive and happy but we know that there remains something in us that longs to reconnect. That is why we are all here today.



You may find that you have not been the only one who has “emotionally cutoff” someone. If you have done that, chances are the other person in your life has done that too. It’s important to give ourselves permission to accept the emotional cutoff, not as a failing, but as a necessity as a human being to be able to live our day to day lives. As you work to reconnect, you will also find yourself in an important step, to accept that they have also emotionally cutoff in order to live their day to day lives.

As you reconnect, these “permissions” and acceptance will be important in order for your relationships to mature and grow beyond what caused the falling out. This is a process that you may or may not choose to take (and your family member/friend).

“Emotional cutoff” can take a few forms. It can be physical, as in literally moving far away or just refusing to see or speak with the person. Or, if there is contact, it’s superficial and you both avoid conversation or sensitive topics.

Before we continue, we should talk about victimization. If you were emotionally, physically, financially abused by the family member/friend you have every right to stop interacting with that person. You do not have to accept this kind of behavior just because they are a family member/friend.

- Is “emotional cutoff” a healthy boundary?
- Can some relationships be too toxic to be repaired?
- Is emotional detachment healthy or detrimental to your well-being?

"I don't believe that somebody's family becomes their blood... families are earned." Angelina Jolie



JOLIE ESTRANGED FROM FATHER & HUSBAND

Some people choose to cut off a family member not because of abuse but because of religious belief, conflict, betrayal, addiction, mental illness, and criminal or unhealthy behaviors. Unless the unhealthy-acting person is willing to be treated and there are visible changes happening, there often seems to be nothing one can do except disconnect. It may be a necessary step to protect ourselves or for them to protect themselves.

However, it's important to note that estrangement can also happen because of a lack of skills to resolve common conflicts.

If there are common conflicts in the relationship that caused the disconnect, the first step to healing might be for the person who initiated the estrangement to work on their triggers and try to figure out what is behind those reactions. Taking the time to heal is also a valuable step. For someone who has been estranged from a family member, taking the space to work out issues before reuniting can be a healthy and crucial step. Remember, these are steps that we can take to own our involvement in the estrangement. We cannot make others do the same introspection. We are in charge of us.

**I can't say it's not  
painful being estranged  
from most of my  
family. I wish it could  
be otherwise.**

QUOTEHD.COM

**LaToya Jackson**  
American Musician

## Session 3: To forgive or not to forgive

Whether the estranger or the estranged, forgiveness is the first step to freeing ourselves from the emotional prison of the past.

- Susanne Babbel Ph.D., M.F.T.



## Reconnections take care and take time.

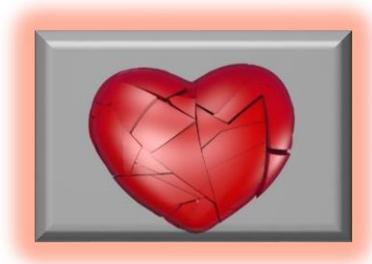
When reconnecting with someone who has brought you harm, either directly or indirectly, there becomes an almost urgent need to talk it through and get an apology (or give one depending on the situation).

**Abusive Relationships:** Laura Davis describes in her book *I Thought We'd Never Speak Again: The Road from Estrangement to Reconciliation*, she has seen positive outcomes working with people who have experienced abuse. Some have been able to resolve their history with their abuser and heal. In the most successful cases, a new perception, a new level of expectation, and setting ground rules have all helped to re-establish healthy relationships.

**Be prepared:** Many times people have attempted to talk about their abuse with the abuser, the abuser has denied their actions and the reconciliation failed. Rarely has the abuser recognized or admitted what they did and apologized. Although an apology is not always the golden key to reunification, without one it can be difficult for two people to come back together.

**Rippling Effect:** As a person who has voluntarily estranged yourself from another, you might still feel a loss - sometimes as if the person has actually died. An abuser often has different faces that not everyone will see. Therefore, when one decides to estrange from their abuser, others might not understand or be supportive, which often causes further estrangement from relatives and community.

It can feel counterintuitive -especially to victims of abuse - and sometimes unsafe, to consider forgiving someone who has caused us great harm. We feel that holding on to our resentment and hatred keeps us protected from future abuse. We are afraid that if we let it go, and soften into forgiveness, that we'll open ourselves up to becoming victims once again.



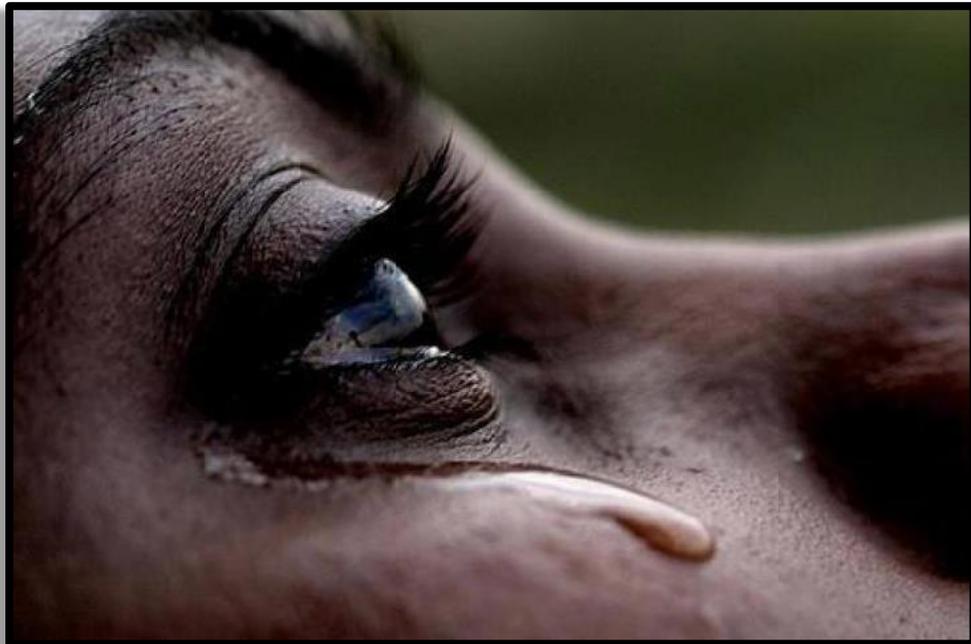
The first step to forgiveness happens inside your own heart, and does not require any re-connection with the person who hurt you. That reconnection may (but doesn't have to) come later. Laura Davis draws a line between forgiveness and reconciliation and explains that it is possible to forgive a person without forgiving their previous actions.

If you have been involuntarily estranged from another, your best coping mechanism is to try to understand that the person doing the distancing is making this decision in order to "let go of what they cannot change" or cope with. This might cause you, as the estranged person, to feel angry, hurt, or at the very least, confused - but it's important for you to remember that you cannot change another person's feelings or triggers.

If you are a person who has experienced estrangement at the hands of another, then your only recourse is to allow the other person to proceed in the way they feel is appropriate - even if you do not agree or understand. Can you love without being

loved back or without having contact? You can try to make amends, but if that does not work you must simply live your own life, even if it seems hard, painful, and empty.

- Emotional prison – what does this mean to you?
- What do you think about forgiveness without reconnection?
- To which do you relate, the estranger or estranged?
- Setting 'ground rules' for a new healthier relationship – how do you imagine getting this done?
- Is an apology necessary for reunification?
- What are the benefits of forgiving?
- Should you forgive someone who has abused you?
- When estrangement ripples – how do you reconnect with those people?



## Session 4: 4 Steps to 'Just Do It'

When we experience a devastating loss, many dominos can fall. Sometimes friends disappear and sometimes we isolate ourselves or alienate other people, even old friends who we love. Sometimes families have falling outs. Sometimes our priorities change and that means letting some people go. The reasons are endless.

Sometimes people disappear from our lives and we are not sure why. Maybe we're scared to hear the reasons why, afraid that we are the cause. Let's put all of these in perspective: The truth is that there are just times when life gets busy, people move away, change jobs, have kids, and suddenly someone who meant a lot to us is no longer around. Whatever the reason, sometimes we look around and realize that we just don't have quite as much love and community as we used to or as we need. The pain of those people who have disappeared can feel even more intense when we're going through rough times and really could use their love and support.

Our awareness of those people missing from our lives (both dead and alive) can become deeply intensified at times and we find ourselves becoming depressed. Or we may try our best to shut these feelings out of our heart. Like we said in the last session, there are times we all need to do that in order to emotionally protect ourselves and to live our day-to-day lives.

It's also not just needing love and support in our rough times, but it's the human desire and need to be around other people we care about. To reconnect and rekindle with people who bring love, hope, and support to our lives. It's the feeling of being in the

presence of another person we connect with, care about, and am excited to be around (even after too many years have gone by).

We don't always have control over people disappearing from our lives and sometimes there is no way to get them back. People we love die – some of us know that well, it may be why you're here. In that case, there is truly no control. You can continue your bond with them, love and remember them, but you can't make them reappear. That's the bad news.

The good news is, sometimes we do have control, even when it doesn't feel like it. Many times we've just told ourselves stories that make us think we don't. We say things like,

*“Oh, it has been way too long, it would be weird to reach out”.*

*“If my grief scared them away, they won't want to be friends, or they aren't worth being friends with”*

*“I did mean things or I did push them away so they'll never forgive me”*

*“They're probably too busy, or don't have time for me, or we've changed too much”*

The stories go on and on.

If you're feeling that your support system has dwindled, if you've lost touch with people you miss or who you cared about, if you're feeling isolated and lonely:

1. **Identify the meaningful people you've lost touch with.** This might mean thinking way back to an old friend from school. It may mean thinking of someone you just haven't talked to in two or three months and really miss.
2. **Ignore those stories you're telling yourself and write a new story.** Guess what – sometimes our thoughts aren't accurate. Sometimes we have to say, just because I am worried about something doesn't mean I shouldn't give it a try anyway! If you're telling yourself the story that it has been too long, or they're too busy, that is nothing more than a thought. It doesn't mean it's true, and it certainly doesn't mean you can't reach out anyway!
3. **Just do it.** Have you been thinking about reaching out to an old friend or family member for a while, but keep putting it off? STOP PUTTING IT OFF. Pull out your phone, open your email, and do it right now. I don't want to sound cliché but, life is short!
4. **Apologize if you need to.** We all screw up, we all hurt other people sometimes. We can't control if someone forgives us, but we can say we're sorry and hope for the best. It isn't easy, but sometimes it really pays off and sometimes people really surprise you. Don't believe me? This year I reached out to someone I was really terrible to after eight years. Eight years! And I was terrible. Terrible! Not only did that person forgive me, but we've somehow managed to restore a friendship I thought was gone for good.

## Session 5: Power and Joy of Reconnections

Ben Healy put it nicely in “Make Old Friends,” his September 2018 article in *The Atlantic*. “Reconnected friends can quickly recapture much of the trust they previously built, while offering each other a dash of novelty drawn from whatever they’ve been up to in the meantime,”

“Making Old Friends” by Ben Healy: citing a recent study by University of Kansas communications studies associate professor Jeffrey Hall (How Many Hours Does It Take to Make a Friend?).

“People early in my life are the foundation from which I continue to grow.”

Kevin Daum

- Who agrees with these statement and why?
- What is it about that sort of “reconnection energy” that is so exciting and brings us joy?
- Do family and friends need to bring us this energy? How do they and how don't they?
- What are some ways we can reconnect?

## Meeting Up In Person

Personal touch – We may get the best results by meeting up in person. It's not the instant gratification of today's social media (e.g. Instant Messaging, or writing on their Facebook wall, telephone) but when you meet *in person* — for a meal, for a drink, for coffee — there's something about seeing them, and their seeing you, that elevates the catch-up to a special level. It's about laughing over old times and about what you can't remember, as well as sharing confidences, revealing secrets, holding back tears and talking through the challenges you've faced over the years.

- Nervous about getting back together?

So maybe you or your friends have lost some hair or gained some weight or walk more slowly than you once did. Big deal! Your life didn't turn out exactly the way you expected? That's life. People understand.

## Reflections From a Reunion

“For many our age, we have lost parents, partners and close, dear friends. For myself, I value my long-term friends — there aren't that many people, other than my siblings, who I've been in relationships with since childhood, and they become more and more precious to me as the years pass.” — Lisa Gottlieb

"I was worried about trying to reconnect with people, some of whom I had not seen in almost 50 years. While I wondered if I would remember them well enough to spend an entire weekend with them, my bigger fear was trying to remember the 13-year-old boy that I was back then. Those fears dissipated when one friend I hadn't seen in almost five decades said, "You don't have to worry, Ken, you are exactly how I remember you!" — Ken Posner

"49 years later, I choose all of you again as friends... Our vulnerable child selves are still visible in our eyes at times, and that had me in tears at times during the reunion weekend. You are all incredible people with gentle souls." — Dr. Susan Strow Stegeman

## Session 6: Fixing Broken Relationships

Maintaining healthy relationships with friends and family can be difficult. We tend to fall into reactive and negative interaction patterns, which often lead to conflict and disconnect.

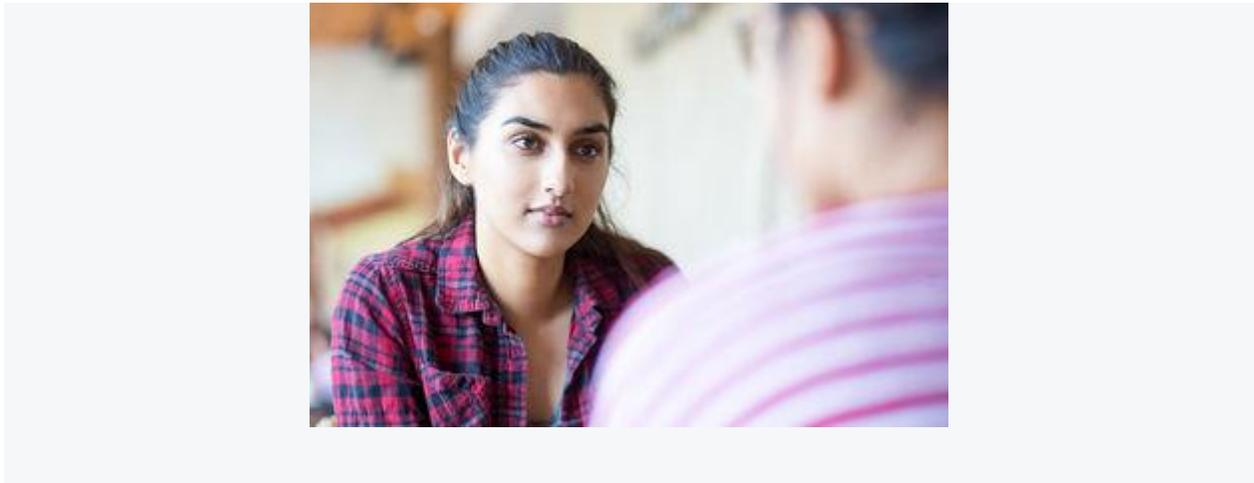
Positive, strong, and healthy relationships take work to maintain. Being analytical about your own and others' emotions is helping in getting the most out of relationships.

- Is there a situation when this would just be too much work?
- What would you do if you felt you were being drained or maybe even taken advantage of?
- How can we be free to accept love and joy while also being on guard to protect ourselves emotionally?
- Why do family and friend-relationships take time and work?
- Why should we be “analytical” instead of emotional in our responses?

Five steps to help reconnect disconnected relationships (Dr. Lukin):

**1. Identify the triggering effect of the other person's behavior.**

Is a friend consistently late to plans? Does your brother talk over you at family gatherings? Every relationship is unique, but when problems arise and reparation is necessary, it's likely that some kind of negative interaction pattern has set in. Brainstorm and analyze what the other person is doing that is causing a reaction from you.



**2. Notice your initial reaction to this person's behavior.**

When your brother talks over you, are you tense? Are you angry? Or maybe you feel sad to be left out of the conversation? With your friend who is always late; maybe you're nervous they're canceling? Or anxious they aren't coming? Delve into your emotions and analyze them to use as information to guide your behavior. Putting a label on your emotions can have a huge impact on how you learn to manage them. Pay attention to how your body feels during these interactions.

### **3. Find the deeper emotion.**

Are you hurt that your brother doesn't care about what you have to say? Are you disappointed that you don't have a voice in your own family? Do you feel that your friend may not be as invested in your friendship as you? Does that make you feel lonely?

Once you have correctly identified the emotion you feel in the moment when a close one did something triggering, try and attach it to a deeper emotion, less dependent on the specific context of being talked over or stood up.

### **4. Understand your own emotional needs.**

In analyzing a relationship or trigger, you also need to understand your own basic emotional needs. Emotional needs are highly individualized. One person may feel it's of the utmost importance to feel appreciated, while another may place more value on feeling needed or depended on. Some people may need to feel heard, feel validated, feel included, or feel nurtured. Understanding your unique constellation of emotional needs is imperative to remedying emotional disconnect with close friends and family.



## 5. Communicate.

Be deliberate about communicating how you feel to the person who is evoking an emotional reaction from you. At the same time, consider this person's unique emotional needs and reactions.

Interpersonal Effectiveness uses the **DEAR MAN** approach from Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). Follow this and it can help you to effectively communicate, and more specifically, get what you desire from another person emotionally while being respectful and paying attention to avoiding conflict.

## DBT & Interpersonal Effectiveness: D-E-A-R-M-A-N

*To begin acquiring some tools to help you along the path towards this aspect of interpersonal effectiveness, let's explore the meaning of the DBT acronym, D-E-A-R M-A-N, adapted from the workbook Don't Let Your Emotions Run Your Life (Spradlin, 2003):*

### Describe:

Use specific words to describe to the other person what you want, explaining yourself through language as clearly as possible. Leave little question as to what it is that you want or need. Practice clarity with your words.

### Express:

Don't shy away from being expressive. Part of learning how to effectively communicate, while still being intentional and mindful, involves using facial expressions, tone of voice, or gestures that capture the content and importance of your

request. There is a delicate balance to be struck here. Work towards finding the happy medium of being expressive while maintaining a sense of self-control. This can be tricky for those of us who have a tendency to get lost in or overwhelmed by emotions.

### Assert:

Work towards finding your own balance between asserting your needs and staying away from aggressiveness (this includes *passive* aggressiveness). Be matter-of-fact as you assert your point(s).

### Reinforce:

Be sure that the other person understands exactly *why* they should respond to your request. Remind them of whatever positive outcomes would come from this request. Other people want to feel *good* about complying with requests – not like they are being coerced into meeting demands. Be careful not to offer rewards that are unrealistic or that you cannot come through on. Be true to your word.

### Mindful:

Don't allow distracting thoughts or intense emotions to cloud your thinking. If the other person responds with defensiveness or hostility, don't allow yourself to engage with the emotional intensity. Stay on track with what it is that you are asking for. If you respond to the other person with your own defensiveness or aggressiveness, your efforts will be sabotaged – you will probably *not* get what it is that you are asking for (at least not in the long-term). Rather than responding with intensity, practice opposite action, radical acceptance, and mindful breathing. Maintain your focus.

### Appear Confident:

If you have trouble believing in the validity of your request, so will other people. Imagine yourself as confident, competent, and deserving of what you want or

need. When you take yourself seriously, others are more likely to do as well. Practice [self-validation](#) on your own to cultivate this skill.

### Negotiate:

When our ideal requests are not met, there is often a way to meet halfway – to find a solution that is “good enough” without compromising our values. A big part of negotiation is about respecting other people's limits. It's not just about you, after all. When the other person believes that you are capable of negotiating, they are much more likely to see you as a reasonable person. A positive consequence of this is that you are more likely to have successful interactions with this person in the future.

Spradlin, S.E. (2003). *Don't let your emotions run your life: how dialectical behavior therapy can put you in control*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

- How can you practice using D-E-A-R M-A-N in your future interpersonal interactions?
- What value do you see in learning how to be more mindful, intentional, and reasonable in your dealings with other people?
- It may be self-evident that these are desirable attributes of a healthy relationship, but if you reflect back on some unhealthy past or current relationships, do you see how using this technique might have been helpful? If so, how?

Learning how to stand up for ourselves while still respecting the needs and limits of other people can take a lot of practice. Remember to be kind to yourself if some of these interpersonal skills are new. Many of us have spent a lifetime learning unhealthy

relationship habits or patterns. The important thing is that you are making a choice now to do things differently.

It may seem like simple stuff, but understanding emotions, and using them as information to guide behavior is key in healthy relationships. When we're not deliberate in identifying them within ourselves, communicating them, and using them as guidance, emotions tend to get lost in translation, misinterpreted, and confused. By using the steps above we can help train ourselves to be more emotionally intelligent. We can become aware of our own emotions and emotional needs, what triggers them, and how to communicate them effectively to another person.



## Session 7: From this Day Forward – DO THIS!



Friendships are incredibly important. At certain stages in our lives, friendships are everything to us – the most important thing in our lives. Friendships help define us. Our friends can influence our choices – where we live, what we eat, what we buy. Friendships grow and change as people come and grow. There is old proverb that says, “friends are flowers in the garden of life.” Friendships need their own kind of water and soil to grow healthy and strong. The following are 25 things to keep in mind to facilitate building stronger friendships from [Alaia Williams](#).

1. **Choose friends wisely.** You do not have to be everyone's friend. Choose to be friends with people who build you up, not tear you down. Choose friends who inspire you and welcome you, not alienate and insult you. You can't choose the family you are born into, but you can choose your friends.

2. **Listen.** Listen closely to what the other person is saying. Let that person know that you hear them. Ask clarifying questions. Summarize what you've heard. Though helpful, it does not always have to be through words. Eye contact and body language are also important ways of showing someone you are listening.
3. **Respond carefully.** Think before you speak – especially if you are angry. Sometimes, taking a moment to think about what you say before you start blurting things out will spare hurt feelings and bruised pride. Also, when friends feel like it is okay to be themselves around you, they trust you. Choose your words with care.
4. **Avoid consistently giving advice or trying to fix all of your friend's problems.** By all means, if a friend asks for your advice, give it. They might want you to proofread an important email before it is sent out. Maybe they are struggling with a relationship. Perhaps life is throwing them a curve ball and they need your support or insight. Don't wiggle your way into every aspect of your friend's life, telling them how to be the star of their own show. Give them room to process things and make their own decisions.
5. **Play fair. Avoid trying to one-up your friends.** Eventually your friends won't want to play with you anymore.
6. **Be authentic.** Be yourself. Be honest. Avoid putting up a facade. We all test our relationships by throwing something out there about our true nature. We then hide behind a corner, head peeking out, waiting for the response. If someone can't accept you for who you are, developing a relationship with them will be hard. Don't shortchange yourself by denying your beliefs, values, and point of view, for the sake of fitting in. You won't be doing anyone any favors.

7. **Communicate openly and honestly.** Developing communication with a person can take time – and trust! Ask your friends what you can do for them. Share what you have to offer. Don't be afraid to let people know what you need. Share what is necessary, but don't dominate conversation. When a problem arises, work through it together.
8. **Accept your friends for who they are.** On your search for friends who can accept your authentic self, keep in mind – other people are looking for the same thing. We all want people who love us for who we are.
9. **Respect their choices. It is okay to disagree.** If your friend decides to make a move when you think standing still is the right thing to do, let them do their thing. If you've given your advice and your friend sees things differently, step aside. What your friend is doing might be right for their life but not yours. They might be making a mistake, but if it doesn't kill them, maim them, or leave them in a coma, hopefully they can learn from the experience.
10. **Be the kind of friend you want others to be for you.** You want friends who are honest, kind, compassionate, fair, not judgmental, authentic, and intelligent. Be that person first and you'll be more likely to attract that kind of friend into your life.
11. **Be empathetic.** Trying to understand things from your friend's point of view can help you communicate and understand each other better.
12. **Give compliments.** Show love for your friends by complimenting them on their good qualities or things they do well. Has a friend done something you admire them for? Let them know!

13. **Express your gratitude.** Let your friends know that you value your friendship. Tell them. Write them a note. Did you see the collector's edition of their favorite movie while you were out? Buy a copy. Surprise your friend by taking him or her out for lunch or dinner at one of their favorite places.
14. **Admit and apologize.** When you do something wrong, admit it. Learn to apologize. Sometimes a friend is upset, and all they want from you is to (genuinely) say "sorry." □ It shows that you realize your misstep, and that you will hopefully not make the same mistake again.
15. **Let go.** Did a friend do something that hurt you? Have you talked it through? Were apologies made? Let go and move on! If you don't, you'll hang on to the transgression and it will taint the relationship going forward. Don't trudge up a prickly patch of your past. Try your best to make a fresh start.
16. **Make time for your friends.** Spend time with your friends. It might feel odd to schedule your friends on your calendar, but if you have a busy schedule, getting them in your book, is better than letting them go. Show your friends that you want to be around them. Is your friend far away? Write them an email, chat with them via IM, call them on the phone, plan a weekend get together. Making time for your friends sends the message that they are an important part of your life.
17. **Keep your promises.** If you know you can't deliver something, don't promise that you will. If you make a promise, do your best to keep it. It is better to say "I don't think I can make it on Saturday night, but let's get lunch next week," than saying you will show up, and then accept a different invitation or cancel at the last minute.

18. **Celebrate what you have in common.** Most friendships are started because of some common thread – a favorite sport, a love of books, an appreciation of fine wine, an insufferable boss. Get season tickets to your favorite baseball team or check out the local library book sale together next month.
19. **Try new things together.** What new experiences can you share with your friend? It could be as simple as checking out the new local coffee shop, or as adventurous as bungee jumping.
20. **Have fun together.** Friendships, like any other relationship, can fall into a rut sometimes – especially if all you do with your friends is share your latest complaints every time you see each other. Shake up the routine. Go out and do something fun you both enjoy, or look at that list of new things to try that you came up with and do one of them. It's great to have a friend you can open up with, but lighten the burden load and let loose – create some happy memories together.
21. **Seek balance in your friendship.** Entering a relationship with selfish motives and being a person who takes and takes and takes until the well runs dry, is likely to lead a lonely life. Serve and support your friends. What can you do for them? How can you help? What can you add to their life or their day to make it a little bit better?
22. **Take equal responsibility for the friendship.** Take turns making plans or driving across town to see each other. If there is a problem, acknowledge your part in it and figure out, together, how to make it right. If both people are not tending to the relationship, it will not flourish.

23. **Be a cheerleader.** Be encouraging. Motivate your friends. Affirmation goes a long way. If your friends aren't in your corner, who is?
24. **Keep personal information confidential.** As relationships grow, it is common for friends to share confidential information with you. If a friend tells you a secret it is because they trust you and believe that you will keep what they told you in the strictest of confidence. Do not betray your friend by sharing their secret stories with others. Many times a relationship has been ruined over spilled secrets.
25. **Unclench your fist. Friendships grow and change. Sometimes they end.** You can change a lot in a year. Imagine how much you can change in 10 years. The person you were when you met someone is not the person you will always be. You grow up. You change your mind about things. Your friends will do the same. Sometimes a friend you've known for years will start to play a bigger role in your life as the years pass. Perhaps your lifestyles change radically and spending tons of time together just does not feel right anymore because you have fewer interests in common. This friend might stay in your life, but might have less impact on and influence in it. That's okay.



If a person is bringing you down, hurting you, or starts to go down a dangerous path, it is completely acceptable to end the relationship. Sometimes we struggle to hang on to a wilting relationship. Many times, it is healthier to let go.

## BAD FRIENDS

are like paper cuts

Both are annoyingly  
painful and make you wish  
you were more careful

## EMOTIONAL BULLYING

- Bully attacks the victim emotionally
- Most common in relationships
- Spreading of rumors
- Excluding someone from certain activities
- Refusing to talk to someone

## Synonyms for Bond

- |                 |                |
|-----------------|----------------|
| 1. Relationship | 1. Partnership |
| 2. Tie          | 2. Association |
| 3. Link         | 3. Promise     |
| 4. Friendship   | 4. Pledge      |
| 5. Fellowship   | 5. Vow         |

People sometimes prefer to build bonds and share their weaknesses with strangers (e.g. psychiatrist, therapist, etc.) because there is no fear of judgement. How neat would it be to have a friendship like this? Where you are heard, seen, validated, and not judged? A place where you are accepted and loved unconditionally? A place where there is no need to put on airs about your income, relationship, or travels?

- Have you ever been judged by someone who was a friend?
- Did anyone ever gossip about you?
- How did these experiences feel and what have you learned about them?
- Do you know how to be a good friend?
- How can we be vulnerable with people and share our hopes and dreams and not be judged?

But what if showing your weaknesses could actually make you more of an asset? What if sharing emotional vulnerabilities could make people feel closer to you and want to protect you as a result?

Is this all just dumb talk? Why would I, in my right mind, disclose that I am secretly a \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank... hoarder, binge eater or drinker, etc.)? Well, hear me out...

### **1.SHOWING VULNERABILITY LEVELS THE PLAYING FIELD, AND COMPLIMENTS ARE ONE WAY TO DO IT.**

You become charming by being disarming. You are not a threat. We are constantly sizing people up, trying to find out where we stand in comparison. We are so afraid that complimenting another somehow makes us appear less than. On the contrary, you endear yourself to the other.

## **2. ASKING FOR HELP AND ADVICE MAKES YOUR FRIEND FEEL LIKE A VALUED EXPERT.**

Seeking a friend's advice on a job, or a doctor's recommendation makes your friend feel like a valuable resource. Asking for advice makes people feel "in the know" and it makes you appear humble. People love humble people.

Of course, you want to remain respectful of your friend's time and resources by reciprocating. This creates a sense of community and shared support system.

For the most part, asking for advice can be win-win when done within reason. Sometimes, though, we are too afraid to come off as a novice. Just remember the line, "There is no such thing as a stupid question". (Or say to yourself, it's OK to risk looking stupid just this once, but then I'll know the answer. If all else fails there is always Wikipedia).

## **3. SELF-DISCLOSURE, WITH THE RIGHT PERSON, STRENGTHENS TRUST AND INVITES THE OTHER TO DO THE SAME, CREATING A COMMON BOND OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE.**

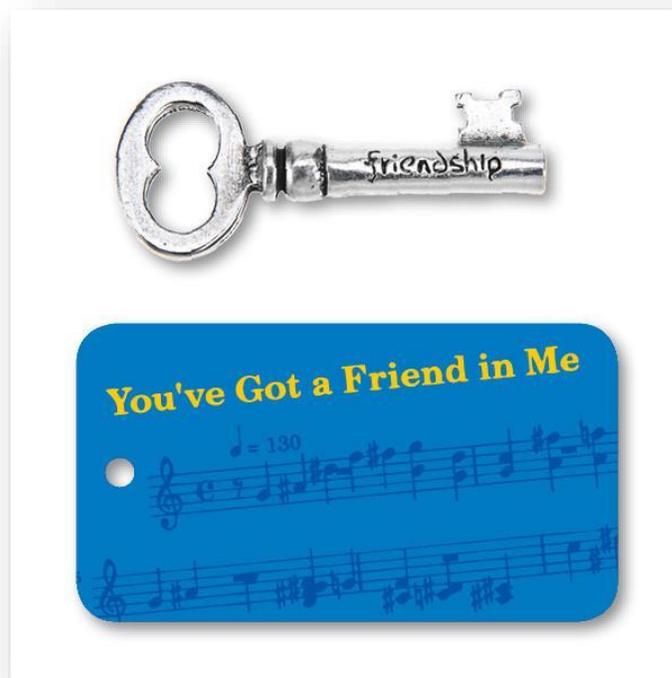
One of my co-workers became a dear friend when she was in the process of her divorce. She reached out to other colleagues, and all of us became tighter as a result of her life-changing experience as she was able to be vulnerable and open up.

This is important in friendships. It says I trust and respect what you have to offer and I value what you think enough to reveal something about myself. I'm not perfect. I'm not better than you. I need help sometimes.

Often we work too hard to preserve an image of being "put together" or want to be seen as "having it all." We don't realize that it's through the cracks that the light comes in. Let people into your life by sharing your difficulties.

We set up barriers to closeness when we act holier-than-thou. Also, people love a little self-deprecating humor when well timed. You don't want to get in the habit of putting yourself down, but being able to laugh at yourself with your friends is key.

[Sue Varma](https://media3.s-nbcnews.com/j/news/cms/2017_09/1916506/170227-better-mn-1705_68149589f2e1d0cdd78eeff045030568.fit-760w.jpg), M.D., FAPA is a board certified psychiatrist practicing in Manhattan and a Clinical Assistant Professor at NYU Langone.  
[https://media3.s-nbcnews.com/j/news/cms/2017\\_09/1916506/170227-better-mn-1705\\_68149589f2e1d0cdd78eeff045030568.fit-760w.jpg](https://media3.s-nbcnews.com/j/news/cms/2017_09/1916506/170227-better-mn-1705_68149589f2e1d0cdd78eeff045030568.fit-760w.jpg)



## Session 9: Conversation Starters to Get Beyond the Awkward Stage of Reconnecting



MORGAN CHILDS

“I think it's a matter of being ready for life to be interesting. When you see someone you haven't met in a long while, it's going to be interesting. Don't expect it to be the same — be delighted for whatever comes up.” - App

### **1. Show a little love.**

“It may seem really obvious,” says Blyth, “but if you’re really happy to see someone, make sure you show it. Warmth and directness and a big hug and a big smile. Or just say, ‘Oh, it’s so good to see you!’ Things like that are always worth saying out loud.

Marking out that safe space, just reminding them how pleased you are to be with them, is the opening gate to any good conversation.”

### **2. Start with small talk.**

“The safe topics are things that don’t look you eye and say, ‘So, what about you? What do you think, what have you done?’” If you ask people about good things, you’ll probably get the best of them. Here are a few conversation starters.

- What are you enjoying at the moment?
- What’s been good for you this year?
- It’s been 10 years since I saw you — what are the highlights for you?

### **3. Tread lightly over old news.**

Although it’s tempting to ask if someone is still doing something — *So, are you still in HR?* — this is actually “the worst question in the world when someone has moved on, or they’ve failed, or their life’s completely changed.” So many of us are not the person we were before.

#### **4. Get out of the past tense.**

Instead of lingering in the past, Blyth suggests talking about what's happening now — or what's happening next. "That's what we're all really most interested in," she observes.

"A small but bland question like 'What are you doing tomorrow?' very easily leads to a very intimate place, like plans and hopes." Then, she adds, "you can dig deeper."

#### **5. Don't be afraid of a little controversy.**

If you're concerned about talking politics, take heart: controversy makes excellent fodder for conversation. A good way to dive into a hot topic is to ask a question. You don't have to agree on everything; it's more about finding things that are relevant to both of you. Try these questions.

- Have you seen the news?
- Can you believe it?
- What do you think?

The key to disagreement, adds Apps, is "keeping the rapport with somebody, keeping the friendship, and being happy to say, 'Well, wow, isn't that interesting! That isn't what I think at all.'"

## 6. Follow the flow and be ready for anything.

Above all, don't try too hard. "The best conversation is one where you're connecting with someone and surprised by the turn of thought," says Blyth. "You want to keep things fresh and spontaneous."



### Other questions (GROUP PRACTICE)

1. Where did you grow up?
2. Do you have any pets?
3. Do you have any siblings?
4. Do you know what your name means?
5. What type of phone do you have?
6. Tell me about you.
7. What's your story?
8. What personal passion project are you working on right now?
9. Working on anything exciting lately?
10. How do you know the host?
11. Have you been to an event like this before?
12. What was the highlight of your day today?
13. What was the highlight of your week?
14. What was the high-point and low-point of your day so far?
15. Is this your busy season? Is this a busy time for you?
16. What are you doing this weekend?...What's your favorite thing to do on the weekends?
17. What are your favorite restaurants around here?
18. Keeping up with \_\_sport\_\_ recently?
19. Can you recommend any unique cocktails here?
20. All the food looks so good... I'm not sure what to get! What are you thinking? Or what have you tried?
21. What a beautiful/cool/ugly/bizarre venue. Have you been here before?
22. Did you see that viral \_\_\_\_ YouTube video? It was all over my social media today.

## Session 10: Working on the friendship

In all my work centered around friendship, the discussion often focuses on avoiding pitfalls, handling dilemmas, fixing damaged relationships, and getting over a split. These are all extremely important parts of the story. But sometimes, the issue is not one of getting past a *bad* friendship, but strengthening a *good* one. Do you have solid friendships with people you'd love to spend more time with? Following are six ways to make it happen:

1. Embrace the little things. It's easy to forget that strong relationships are not made in giant, sweeping, strokes, but in the continuity of little connections and kindnesses. Taking six minutes to pick up your friend's favorite candy when she's feeling low, bringing him soup—even if it's not homemade—when he's down with the flu, writing a note on beautiful stationery or sending a novelty postcard just because it's Tuesday, are all simple things that bring a spark to someone's day—and to your own as well.
2. Road trip. Even if it's not far, a simple getaway can bring a new level of connection to a friendship. Spending just one night at a fun hotel in a nearby but unexplored city can be the perfect change of pace that helps you strengthen the foundation of your friendship. Time away from the day-to-day will help you feel more relaxed, and the anticipation of the trip—and the memories you'll carry afterward—give the experience additional meaning and value.

3. Take on new experiences. A long-term, good-enough friendship can sometimes take on the air of an in-a-rut marriage, with both of you needing a shot of adrenaline. Starting a new activity together—even just to laugh at yourselves while doing it—or taking a class in something you've always been interested in (a day of trapeze lessons or wine-tasting, anyone?) can deliver a jolt of novelty and the shared motivation of learning something new.
  
4. Get healthier together. Making the commitment to stop smoking, take power walks together, meditate, or sign up for Crossfit can have both physical and emotional benefits. Being in the same boat as you endure the highs and lows of the effort can help solidify your commitment toward each other as well. Added bonus: The social support, accountability, and "contagion" effects will make each of you more likely to reach your goals.
  
5. Take feedback. Really. Try not to write off your friend's honest complaints—or raves—about you just because they're uncomfortable to listen to. All too often in a friendship, people give each other signals about what's really going right (or wrong), but they go unheeded or glossed over in favor of easier, more surface topics. Instead, use feedback as an opportunity to fine-tune your relationship. Listen for your friend's hints—the more that you're able to understand his or her thoughts and feelings and take his or her perspective, the better a friend you can be, and the more personalized your relationship can become.

6. Reveal something that makes you vulnerable. Often, the strongest glue between two people is the trust that develops after one or both shares something about their fears, flaws, or insecurities. Think of the people who know you best and to whom you feel closest. Chances are, they're privy to aspects of yourself that you wouldn't exactly shout from the rooftops (or on Facebook.) If you've got someone good in your life, let them get a little closer to the real you, even if it pushes you out of your comfort zone a bit.

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## Session 11: Opportunities

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF OPPORTUNITIES THAT COME YOUR WAY – IF AN OLD FRIEND OR FAMILY MEMBER REACHES OUT TO YOU, YOU HAVE A CHOICE TO EITHER RESPOND OR NOT RESPOND.

**This is a critical juncture!** Maybe historically you have turned down invitations to get together, but at what cost? Now that you have made the decision to reconnect with family and friends, make sure to make the most of the opportunities that cross your path.

Reconnections will happen for you. When you make the decision to reconnect, your eyes will be open to the opportunities that present themselves. Not just for reconnections, but for making new friends as well.

**ACTIVE PARTICIPANT** - You will engage in the skills discussed during this class on reconnecting with family and friends. You have successfully reviewed things to say, people to avoid, people to engage and how to engage them. These are the things that you will begin to do from here on out to reconnect with your family and friends. This is something you will ACTIVELY do to reconnect.

**OPPORTUNITIES** – another way is to take advantage of opportunities that come your way. Let's say you are successful in reconnecting with your mother. Then she invites you to dinner and you are able to reconnect with her sister, your aunt. Then she reintroduces you to her son, your cousin, whom you haven't seen in years. This may be the one reconnection that is most meaningful and supportive to you. The idea here, is that one reconnection leads to the next!

**ONE RECONNECTION  
LEADS TO THE NEXT  
RECONNECTION AND SO  
ON AND SO ON!**

## Session 12: Wrap-Up and Closing

I would like to say that we got together because I was thoughtful and self-aware about how much I missed having him in my life, so reached out. But that isn't what happened. I saw him because I ran into his mom and step-dad. I know, lame. That chance encounter led to a text and a call and ultimately a breakfast where we both talked about how excited we were to see one another, to collaborate to help people grieving here in Baltimore, and to spend some time together again.

I think that a sign of a strong friendship is the ability to pick up from where you left off after not having seen one another for a while. Maybe you haven't seen somebody you were once very close with in a while and you didn't stay in very regular touch -- everyone has some guilt about how regularly they do or don't talk to their long-distance friends. If you're awkward like me, you might worry that the reunion will be uncomfortable or unnatural. Are we both totally different people? Did I miss any significant milestones? Did I send them a birthday text last year? Despite the potentially dulled connection, you feel obligated to get lunch together because a lot of time has passed.

Sometimes it doesn't quite work out the way you hope it will, with the connection springing back into the forefront of your mind and rekindling the feelings from the days you spent bonding and making memories years ago. Maybe one of you is more mature than the other, or your interests have diverged and you no longer have much to talk about. It can be painful to realize that hanging out with a "friend" just isn't fun.

Rare are the connections that resume as if uninterrupted -- a moment's greeting and then everything falls into place as normal. When a group of my close friends gets together after time apart, I am always astounded to see that our group dynamic weathers just about all personal changes, significant milestones, setbacks, and separations. When we reconvene, it feels like being at home by a warm fire and reminiscing about good memories.

Even after a year (or more!) apart, even through intense ups or downs, a good friend will still feel like the person you've always known and loved. It can be incredibly comforting to have a strong, stable connection when so much else in life is dynamic and hard to count on, so it's essential that we work on cultivating the relationships we have into ones that last.

## **CLASS CLOSING**



# *Congratulations!*

