

Our Communication Our Team Couples Workbook

A gentle way to use this resource

Begin anywhere. Read one section at a time, choose only what fits, and skip, adapt, pause, or stop as needed. Try one practice before adding another. Reflection is an invitation, not a requirement.

Created by Michelle D. Elder, MSW, LMHC | My Reflective Collective

Educational wellness material. Not therapy, diagnosis, medical advice, crisis care, or a substitute for individualized professional support.



Before you begin

Take a moment to notice where you are starting. There is no correct answer and no requirement to complete every prompt.

What is most present?	What would feel supportive?
[ ] Tension or restlessness [ ] Heavy emotion [ ] Numbness or shutdown [ ] Racing thoughts [ ] Low energy [ ] Something else: _____	[ ] More steadiness [ ] More clarity [ ] Comfort or rest [ ] A practical next step [ ] Connection or support [ ] Something else: _____

A simple rhythm

1. Notice	Name what is happening without judging it.
2. Choose	Select one prompt or practice that fits your energy and circumstances.
3. Try	Use it gently for a clear amount of time. Smaller still counts.
4. Check	Notice whether you feel even slightly steadier, clearer, safer, or less alone.

Low-energy option

Read only the headings. Circle or note one sentence that feels useful. Then choose one action that takes five minutes or less. You can return later; stopping is allowed.

A supportive worksheet for clarifying needs, language, consent, repair, and respectful limits.

Use this at your own pace. Skip, adapt, pause, or stop. You are allowed to choose what fits your body, culture, privacy, energy, safety, access needs, and real-life limits today.

A printable reflection and practice resource

OUR COMMUNICATION, OUR

TEAM

A Couples Workbook for Feeling Heard, Speaking Clearly & Repairing with Care A shared aim Healthy communication is not the absence of disagreement. It is the ability to stay respectful, understand what is happening underneath the words, and return to one another after disconnection.

This workbook helps partners slow reactive cycles, express feelings and needs without blame, listen without immediately defending, and create communication habits that fit their actual relationship.

PAUSE - LISTEN - UNDERSTAND - REPAIR

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PART FOUNDATION

A Trauma-Informed Communication Playbook

Difficulty opening up is not a character flaw. Silence, overexplaining, pleasing, distancing, freezing, or becoming highly alert may have developed as intelligent ways to protect safety, attachment, dignity, or belonging.

TRAUMA-INFORME We prioritize emotional and physical safety, trust, transparency, choice, collaboration, D MEANS empowerment, cultural humility, and respect for each person's pace. We ask "What happened, what is happening now, and what helps?" rather than "What is wrong with you?"

A protective response can be understandable and still have an impact. This workbook holds both truths: your nervous system may be trying to help you survive, and you remain responsible for communicating without intimidation, cruelty, coercion, or control.

Core permissions

-] I may pass or return later. [ ] I may write instead of speak.
-] I may ask for slower pacing. [ ] I may request no touch.
-] I may need movement or less eye contact. [ ] I may ask what a question means.
-] I may name an access need. [ ] I may stop if I feel unsafe.

Opening up feels safer for me when:

Something I want my partner to know about my pace is:

THERAPEUTIC PAUSE & PARTNER CHECK-IN

Choice first: Either person may write privately, pass, ask for a different question, or pause. Sharing is invited - never owed.

1. Settle: If comfortable, feel your feet or the chair supporting you. Let your eyes

orient to the room. Take a natural or slower breath. Notice emotion, body sensations, energy, and any urge to protect yourself.

2. Self-reflection: What helps me experience choice rather than pressure?

3. Together: Each partner completes: "You never have to disclose before you are

ready. A supportive way I can invite you is..."

4. Reconnect: Each person may name one appreciation, one need, and one small

request. "Not yet" is a valid response; agree on what happens next.

Supportive practice: Consent applies to emotional disclosure too. Curiosity is an invitation, not an interrogation.

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Your Nervous System in Conversation

When the brain detects threat, access to flexible thinking, language, memory, and empathy may narrow. This is a body response - not _____ _____ proof that someone does not care.

A PRACTICAL Inside a workable window, you can feel emotion and still stay present. Above it, you WINDOW may fight, flee, panic, argue, or become intensely activated. Below it, you may freeze, collapse, disconnect, go blank, or feel numb. People can move between states quickly.

My "too much" signals

-] Heart racing or heat [ ] Rapid speech

-] Interrupting [ ] Urgency to resolve now

-] Pacing or agitation [ ] Tunnel vision My "too little / shut down" signals

-] Blank mind [ ] Heavy or numb body

-] Few words [ ] Avoiding eye contact

-] Extreme tiredness [ ] Feeling far away

When I am within my workable window, I notice:

What helps me return toward enough safety:

What my partner can do - and what not to do:

THERAPEUTIC PAUSE & PARTNER CHECK-IN

2. Self-reflection: Which state am I in now: connected enough, activated, shut

down, or unsure?

3. Together: Share your signals and preferred support. The listener asks

permission before touching, coaching breathing, or asking more questions. next.

Supportive practice: Regulation is personal. Slow breathing and eye contact help some people and unsettle others; offer options rather than commands.

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Opening Up Gradually: The Vulnerability

Ladder

Trust often grows through repeated experiences of being respected. Partners do not need to begin with the most painful topic.

BUILD FROM Begin with a preference or small present-day feeling. Then try a manageable need, a LOWER TO HIGHER recent disappointment, or a hope. More tender history can wait until there is enough RISK trust, skill, support, and choice.

My opening-up ladder

Level 1 - Easy to share: a preference, appreciation, or small feeling:

Level 2 - Some vulnerability: a need, worry, or recent disappointment:

Level 3 - More tender: a fear, shame point, grief, or important history:

A topic I am not ready to discuss - or only want to discuss with professional

support:

Partner response menu

-] "Thank you for trusting me." [ ] "Would you like listening or ideas?"
-] "You can share only what feels okay." [ ] "Do you want a pause?"
-] "What would help you feel supported?" [ ] "I will not use this against you later."

THERAPEUTIC PAUSE & PARTNER CHECK-IN

2. Self-reflection: What level of vulnerability feels challenging but manageable

today?

3. Together: The speaker chooses the level and time limit. The listener practices

receiving without demanding details. next.

Supportive practice: A respectful response to a small disclosure lays groundwork for future openness. Do not treat disclosure as proof of love.

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Person-Centered Communication

You are the expert on your own inner experience. A partner can be curious and supportive without defining, diagnosing, or overruling

what you feel. _____ _____ PERSON-CENTERED Offer empathy, genuineness, respect, and belief in each person's capacity. Replace "I STANCE know why you do that" with "What is that like for you?" Replace "You should feel..." with "What feels true to you?" Language that protects personhood

-] Ask, do not assume. [ ] Use the person's own words.

-] Honor "I do not know yet." [ ] Separate behavior from identity.

-] Notice strengths and survival wisdom. [ ] Make room for mixed feelings.

-] Invite preferences and choices. [ ] Collaborate on next steps.

What do I wish people understood about the way I communicate?

_____

_____

A strength I bring to difficult conversations:

How I prefer to receive care, feedback, or reassurance:

A label or assumption that does not fit me:

THERAPEUTIC PAUSE & PARTNER CHECK-IN

2. Self-reflection: What part of my experience most needs respect rather than

advice?

3. Together: The listener responds: "What I appreciate about how you know

yourself is..." Then asks one open, non-leading question. next.

Supportive practice: Empathy does not require perfect understanding. Humble curiosity is often more connecting than certainty.

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Culture, Identity, Neurodiversity & Access

Communication is shaped by culture, race, ethnicity, language, gender, sexuality, disability, neurotype, faith, family roles, power, and lived experience. Difference is not automatically dysfunction.

Differences we may need to understand

-] Direct vs. indirect language [ ] Eye contact expectations

-] Volume or expressiveness [ ] Silence and processing time

-] Touch and personal space [ ] Individual vs. family orientation

-] Literal vs. implied meaning [ ] Sensory sensitivity

-] Need for predictability [ ] Speech, writing, or AAC preferences

-] Masking or social fatigue [ ] Experiences of bias or exclusion

A communication norm from my culture or family that matters to me:

An identity or lived experience that affects how safe I feel speaking:

An accommodation or adjustment that supports me:

What respectful curiosity sounds like to me:

ACCESS IS PART OF Helpful options may include agendas, advance notice, written prompts, extra CONNECTION processing time, lower lighting, movement, fewer questions at once, captions, an interpreter, alternative communication, or professional support.

THERAPEUTIC PAUSE & PARTNER CHECK-IN

2. Self-reflection: Have I mistaken difference, disability, or processing style for

disrespect or lack of caring?

3. Together: Each partner names one communication preference and one

adjustment they are willing to try. next.

Supportive practice: Do not require eye contact, immediate speech, touch, or a particular emotional style as proof of honesty or love.

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PART 1

My Communication Story

Complete separately, then share only what feels safe and useful.

Growing up, conflict or difficult feelings were usually handled by:

When I tried to speak up, I learned that:

The communication habit I want to keep is:

The habit I want to change is:

When I feel unheard, I tend to:

What helps me feel emotionally safe enough to talk:

THERAPEUTIC PAUSE & PARTNER CHECK-IN

2. Self-reflection: What old lesson may be shaping my reaction today?

3. Together: Take turns finishing: "It makes sense that I learned to protect myself

by..." The listener reflects without evaluating. next.

Supportive practice: Understanding a protective habit is not the same as excusing harm; it creates a place to choose differently.

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PART 2

How We Communicate Under Stress

Stress often narrows attention and makes protection feel more urgent than connection.

My common stress responses

-] Pursue or demand an answer [ ] Withdraw or go quiet

-] Explain repeatedly [ ] Become defensive

-] Use sarcasm [ ] Raise my voice

-] People-please or agree too quickly [ ] Shut down or feel numb

-] Problem-solve before validating [ ] Bring up several old issues

A sign I am becoming activated is:

The story my mind starts telling me is:

What I am often protecting underneath my reaction:

COMMON CYCLE One partner protests disconnection; the other protects against pressure. The first partner intensifies; the second withdraws more. The cycle becomes the problem - not either person.

THERAPEUTIC PAUSE & PARTNER CHECK-IN

2. Self-reflection: What do I do in the cycle, and what vulnerable feeling sits

underneath it?

3. Together: Name the cycle together: "We are in the pursue-withdraw /

defend-explain / criticize-shut-down loop." next.

Supportive practice: Use "the cycle is here" instead of "you are the problem."

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PART 3

Safety & Readiness Before a Hard Talk

A productive conversation needs enough safety, time, privacy, and nervous-system capacity.

Readiness check

-] We are physically and emotionally safe. [ ] Neither person is intoxicated or severely impaired.

-] We have enough time. [ ] Children cannot overhear.

-] We can pause without punishment. [ ] We can avoid insults, threats, and intimidation.

-] We know the topic. [ ] We agree on when to stop.

The topic we are discussing - in one sentence:

What outcome am I hoping for?

_____
_____ What am I willing to understand, own, or change?

_____
_____ WHEN TO PAUSE Pause if either person feels flooded, unsafe, unable to listen, or tempted to

_____
_____ intimidate, threaten, insult, or destroy property. A communication worksheet is not a safety plan.

THERAPEUTIC PAUSE & PARTNER CHECK-IN

2. Self-reflection: On a 0-10 scale, how activated am I? What would lower it by

one point?

3. Together: Compare readiness. If either person is above a mutually chosen

level, schedule a return time. next.

Supportive practice: A pause is protective when it includes a clear return: "I need 30 minutes. I will come back at 7:30."

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PART 4

Listening to Understand

Listening is not agreement. It is making room for your partner's experience before adding your own.

THE LISTENER'S JOB Face your partner if comfortable. Put distractions down. Do not prepare a rebuttal.

Reflect the meaning and emotion. Ask whether you understood. Validate what makes

_____
_____ sense.

Reflective listening stems

-] "What I hear you saying is..." [ ] "The part that feels most important is..."

-] "It sounds like you felt..." [ ] "Did I understand that?"

-] "Tell me more about..." [ ] "What do you need most from me right now?" What makes it hard for me to listen without defending? _____ _____ What helps me stay present? _____ _____

Two-minute listening practice

Speaker: Something small I want you to understand is:

Listener reflection:

Speaker correction or confirmation:

THERAPEUTIC PAUSE & PARTNER CHECK-IN

2. Self-reflection: What happened inside me while I listened?

3. Together: Switch roles. Each listener reflects content, emotion, and need

before responding. next.

Supportive practice: Try to understand accurately before trying to be understood fully.

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PART 5

Validation Without Automatically Agreeing

Validation communicates: "Your experience makes sense from where you stand." VALIDATION CAN "Given what you thought was happening, I understand why you felt hurt." "I can see SOUND LIKE how my timing affected you." "Your need matters to me, even though I see the situation differently."

Validation is not:

-] Agreeing with every detail [ ] Taking blame for everything

-] Giving up your boundary [ ] Excusing harmful behavior

-] Solving the problem immediately [ ] Saying feelings determine facts

A feeling I have wanted my partner to understand:

What would validation sound like to me?

A part of my partner's experience I can genuinely validate:

THERAPEUTIC PAUSE & PARTNER CHECK-IN

2. Self-reflection: Am I afraid validation will erase my perspective?

3. Together: Each person offers one honest validating sentence. The receiver

says what landed and what did not. next.

Supportive practice: Use "and" instead of "but": "I understand why that hurt, and I want to share what was happening for me."

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PART 6

Speak Clearly: Feeling, Need, Request

Global criticism creates shame and defensiveness. Specific observations and requests create something workable.

A CLEAR MESSAGE Observation: "When the plan changed and I did not know..." Feeling: "I felt anxious and unimportant..." Need: "because I need predictability and consideration." Request: "Would you text me when plans change?" Turn criticism into a request

Instead of "You never listen," I could say:

Instead of "You do not care," I could say:

Instead of "I have to do everything," I could say:

Request check

-] Specific [ ] Observable

-] Respectful [ ] Possible to decline

-] Focused on now/next time [ ] Not a disguised character judgment

THERAPEUTIC PAUSE & PARTNER CHECK-IN

2. Self-reflection: What feeling and need are underneath my complaint?

3. Together: Take turns using: "When ___, I feel ___ because I need ___. Would

you be willing to ___?" next.

Supportive practice: A request invites a response. If "no" is not allowed, it may be a demand; keep negotiating the need.

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PART 7

Defensiveness, Criticism & Assumptions

Protecting yourself is understandable; automatic defense can prevent accountability and connection.

Patterns to notice

-] Mind-reading [ ] "Always" or "never" statements

-] Character attacks [ ] Cross-complaining

-] Explaining before acknowledging impact [ ] Keeping score

-] Sarcasm or contempt [ ] Changing the subject

-] Demanding instant forgiveness [ ] Using vulnerability as ammunition

A phrase that quickly puts me on the defensive:

What I fear it means about me:

One part I can own without taking responsibility for everything:

TRY A PARTIAL "You are right that I interrupted." "I can see that my tone felt dismissive." "My OWNERSHIP intention was different, and I understand the impact."

THERAPEUTIC PAUSE & PARTNER CHECK-IN

2. Self-reflection: Can I separate feedback about one behavior from a judgment

about my whole worth?

3. Together: Each person names one small piece they can own. No

countercomplaint for two minutes. next.

Supportive practice: Accountability is most useful when it is specific, sincere, and connected to a next action.

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PART 8

Triggers & Tender Places

A present-day moment can touch an older fear: rejection, control, failure, abandonment, invisibility, or not being enough.

When I am triggered, I may feel:

-] Rejected [ ] Controlled

-] Criticized [ ] Unimportant

-] Abandoned [ ] Trapped

-] Shamed [ ] Helpless

-] Invisible [ ] Not good enough

The situation that tends to activate this feeling:

The meaning my mind gives it:

What is true in the present moment?

What reassurance, boundary, or action would help?

GROUNDING Name five things you see. Feel your feet. Lengthen the exhale. Hold something cool.

OPTIONS Look around and name where you are. Ask before offering touch.

THERAPEUTIC PAUSE & PARTNER CHECK-IN

2. Self-reflection: How old does this feeling seem, and what does the present-day

me know now?

3. Together: Share the tender feeling without requiring your partner to fix it. The

listener asks, "Comfort, understanding, space, or problem-solving?" next.

Supportive practice: Triggers deserve care and accountability. They do not justify intimidation, cruelty, or control.

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PART 9

Therapeutic Time-Outs That Lead Back

A time-out should lower harm and support return - not punish, abandon, or control.

Our time-out plan

The words either of us can use to request a pause:

How we will confirm the relationship is still intact:

Minimum and maximum break length:

Where each person can regulate safely:

Exact return time and place:

During the break, I will:

-] Breathe or move [ ] Write feelings and needs

-] Avoid rehearsing accusations [ ] Avoid retaliatory texting/posts

-] Seek safe support [ ] Return at the agreed time

If more time is needed, we will communicate it by:

THERAPEUTIC PAUSE & PARTNER CHECK-IN

2. Self-reflection: Do I use distance to regulate, punish, pursue, or force

reassurance?

3. Together: Practice the script: "I care about this and I am too activated to do it

well. I need __ minutes. I will return at __." next.

Supportive practice: If someone feels unsafe, prioritize safety and specialized support rather than requiring a joint return.

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PART 10

Repair After Disconnection

Repair is the process of acknowledging impact, taking responsibility, tending hurt, and changing what happens next.

A FIVE-PART REPAIR 1. Name what happened. 2. Own your behavior without "but." 3. Reflect the impact.

4. Express sincere remorse. 5. Make a specific change or amends.

What happened - without character judgments?

My part was:

The impact I understand was:

What I wish I had done instead:

My specific repair or next action:

Receiver reflection

What part of the repair helped?

What do I still need - if anything?

THERAPEUTIC PAUSE & PARTNER CHECK-IN

2. Self-reflection: Am I ready to repair, or am I trying to end discomfort quickly?

3. Together: The speaker repairs; the listener may receive without promising

immediate forgiveness. Then switch if both have a part to own. next.

Supportive practice: Repair is not complete only because the words were said. Consistent changed behavior rebuilds safety.

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PART 11

Digital Communication & Boundaries

Phones and messages can support connection or amplify ambiguity, surveillance, avoidance, and impulsive conflict.

Discuss your expectations

-] Response-time expectations [ ] Texting during work

-] Location sharing [ ] Device privacy

-] Social media posting [ ] Contact with former partners

-] Conflict by text [ ] Phone-free time

-] Reading messages aloud [ ] Posting relationship concerns

A digital behavior that helps me feel connected:

A digital behavior that creates stress or mistrust:

A boundary I need:

A compromise I can offer:

TEXTING DURING Use text for logistics, reassurance, or scheduling a conversation. Nuance is easily lost.

CONFLICT Avoid long accusation chains, repeated demands, threats, or public posting.

THERAPEUTIC PAUSE & PARTNER CHECK-IN

2. Self-reflection: What am I hoping this message will accomplish?

3. Together: Read a draft aloud together only if both feel safe. Ask: Is it clear,

respectful, necessary, and better discussed live? next.

Supportive practice: Delay sending when activated. Privacy is not the same as secrecy; boundaries should be mutual and freely agreed.

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PART 12

Our Weekly Communication Check-In

A predictable check-in can keep smaller concerns from becoming emergency conversations.

One thing I appreciated this week:

A moment I felt connected:

A moment I felt distant or misunderstood:

Something I am carrying emotionally:

One thing I need more or less of:

One practical request for next week:

One thing I want us to enjoy together:

End-of-check-in rating

-] I felt heard. [ ] I listened with curiosity.

-] We stayed respectful. [ ] We made a clear next step.

What would make next week's check-in safer or more useful?

THERAPEUTIC PAUSE & PARTNER CHECK-IN

2. Self-reflection: What am I proud of in how I showed up today?

3. Together: Each partner completes: "One thing I understand better now is..."

and "One thing I want you to remember is..." next.

Supportive practice: Keep the check-in brief and predictable. Not every concern must be solved in one sitting.

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PART 13

Connection Games & Shared Journal

Practice communication when the stakes are low, playful, and warm.

The curiosity game

-] What helps you feel cared for lately? [ ] What has been taking up mental space?

-] What is a small dream you have? [ ] What makes home feel safe?

-] What would make this week lighter? [ ] What do you miss doing together?

The appreciation mirror

Partner A names a specific appreciation. Partner B replies, "What that means to me is..." Switch roles. Do not minimize, joke away, or immediately return the compliment.

Shared journal prompts

Something I want you to understand about me today:

A moment I felt loved or supported:

A worry I have not known how to say:

One way we are growing as a team:

THERAPEUTIC PAUSE & PARTNER CHECK-IN

2. Self-reflection: Do I feel open, guarded, playful, tired, or tender right now?

3. Together: Choose one prompt. Share only to the level that feels safe. The

listener asks one curious follow-up. next.

Supportive practice: Connection grows through many small moments of responsiveness, not only intense conversations.

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PART 14

Our Communication Experiment

Choose one small practice to test. Do not attempt to change every pattern at once.

-] Five-minute daily check-in [ ] Reflect before responding

-] One validation per day [ ] No conflict by text

-] Use the clear-message formula [ ] Practice a timed pause

-] Weekly communication meeting [ ] Ask: comfort or solutions?

-] Repair within 24 hours when safe [ ] One phone-free connection period

The experiment we choose:

When and where we will practice:

The likely barrier:

Our backup plan:

After one week

-] We felt more understood. [ ] Conflict intensity decreased.

-] Requests became clearer. [ ] Repair happened sooner.

-] The practice felt realistic. [ ] We want to keep, change, or stop it.

What we learned:

What we will try next:

THERAPEUTIC PAUSE & PARTNER CHECK-IN

2. Self-reflection: Am I measuring perfection, or noticing small movement?

3. Together: Each person names one effort they observed in the other and one

adjustment that would help. next.

Supportive practice: Treat the practice as shared data, not a test of love or character.

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PART 15

Our Communication Agreement

A flexible agreement for protecting honesty, dignity, safety, and connection.

-] We will address behavior, not attack character. [ ] We will not use threats, intimidation, or contempt.

-] We will listen before rebutting. [ ] We will ask for clarification instead of mind-reading.

-] We will honor appropriate pauses. [ ] We will return at an agreed time.

-] We will protect private disclosures. [ ] We will repair and follow through.

Words or behaviors that are not acceptable in our conversations:

How we will signal that we need to slow down:

How we will ask for comfort, validation, space, or solutions:

How often we will revisit this agreement:

THERAPEUTIC PAUSE & PARTNER CHECK-IN

2. Self-reflection: Does this agreement allow both honesty and safety?

3. Together: Read the agreement aloud. Each partner may request a change

before signing. next.

Supportive practice: An agreement cannot make coercion safe. If fear or control is present, seek individual, specialized support.

Partner: _____ Date: _____

Partner: _____ Date: _____

Educational-wellness disclaimer

If someone is in immediate danger, call 911. In the United States, call or text 988 for the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.

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SAFETY, PRIVACY & EDUCATIONAL USE

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Supportive practices and reminders

Trauma-informed choice

You are in charge of pace, privacy, and participation. Keep your eyes open if that feels safer. Change the words, position, movement, or environment. Skip any prompt that increases distress. You never have to describe a traumatic experience to benefit from grounding or reflection.

A one-minute mindfulness pause

Notice one point of support beneath you. Look around and name three neutral things you see. Notice one sound and one body sensation without trying to change either. Ask, 'What would support me in the next few minutes?' Choose the smallest workable response.

Believable affirmations

Choose language your mind can accept. Try: 'I can take one step at a time.' 'My needs and boundaries matter.' 'I am allowed to pause.' 'I can ask for support.' 'This moment is difficult, and it will not always feel exactly like this.' Edit any statement until it feels honest and respectful.

Practical tips

Pair reflection with water, food, movement, rest, medication as prescribed, or contact with a safe person when needed. Save the most helpful page where it is easy to find. Revisit the resource when you are relatively steady so the choices feel familiar during harder moments.

When more support is appropriate

A worksheet cannot provide emergency care, diagnosis, or individualized treatment. Consider a qualified health or mental-health professional when distress is intense, persistent, worsening, affecting daily functioning, or connected with safety concerns. In immediate danger, contact local emergency services or a crisis service available in your country.

Integrate and choose your next step

Pause after reading. More information is not always more helpful; the goal is to leave with one choice you can actually use.

What stood out?

_____

_____

What is one kind, realistic next step?

_____

_____

What support, boundary, or adaptation would help?

_____

_____

If this did not help

You did not fail. Try making the step smaller, changing from a thinking practice to a body or sensory practice, checking basic needs, or involving a safe person. Strong, persistent, or worsening distress may need professional or crisis support beyond a worksheet.