



# 10 SKILLS FOR BUILDING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

**Tipping the Scales toward  
Secure Attachment**



## Introduction

Secure attachment may seem like an unattainable goal for many of us, but it is how we are all intrinsically wired to relate. Even if your past was less than ideal and you have insecure attachment adaptations—through the practice of these fundamental relational skills, you can begin to repattern your experience and recover your innate capacity for healthy, authentic and joyful relationships!

These skills are applicable for any type of relationship—from parenting to intimate partnerships, family, friends...even work colleagues. I encourage you to practice these qualities as much and often as possible. As you restore and strengthen your secure attachment skills, you'll begin to experience and embody more compassion, maturity and love in all its forms.





# 10 SKILLS FOR BUILDING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

## Tipping the Scales toward Secure Attachment

### 1. Practice Presence + Attunement

One of the ways I define secure attachment is “attunement.” **Attunement**—being aware, attentive and responsive to another person’s emotions, thoughts and reactions—is a conscious process through which we learn to respond and bond to others and form relationships.

Attunement is deeply rooted in emotional attachment. When a baby cries, for example, their caregiver recognizes that they’re hungry, and in response, soothes and feeds them. As their basic needs are met quickly, consistently and lovingly, the baby learns to trust and expect safety.

This skill is just as important in all types of adult relationships. Attunement, or empathetic concern, demonstrates to others that we understand their perspective on the world, resonate with what they’re feeling and are there with them—it shows them that they’re not alone.

And like empathy, attunement involves staying truly present, paying attention and responding in ways that convey that you care about and understand the person—whether that’s listening attentively to your partner talk about a hard day at work, playing with a child who’s feeling down or offering support to a co-worker who seems overwhelmed.





## 2. Listen Actively

Healthy and effective communication is crucial in all relationships—and active listening is a critical component. When we're listening actively, we focus on our communication partner and make a conscious effort to engage, understand and retain the information being relayed, including nonverbal cues such as tone, facial expressions and body language. We analyze the content, context, emotion and intent—and are able to articulate informed feedback and appropriate responses to improve mutual understanding.

Re-stating what someone says, reflecting what they're feeling or asking open-ended questions like, "How did you feel about that?" can help the other person feel heard, while avoiding conflict or further misunderstanding. It's also important to continue listening until it's your turn to speak—don't start planning your rebuttal or defending yourself in your head.

Eye contact, supportive body language and verbal acknowledgement also demonstrate active engagement. In fact, we're neurologically designed to communicate face-to-face, so making eye contact at appropriate times—I call it the "beam gleam," "kind eyes" or the "attachment gaze"—can convey an immense amount of presence and care.

### 3. Cultivate Mutuality

There's a popular saying, *"Do you want to be right, or do you want to be happy?"* I think this sums up the idea of **mutuality** quite well. When we recognize that each person within the relationship has their own needs and desires—and that these needs matter equally—it becomes easier to not only communicate our own needs more clearly and effectively, but also to consider others' thoughts, feelings and emotions when taking action or making decisions.

This doesn't mean that we don't advocate for our position, but that we can acknowledge and honor the other person's perspective at the same time. Mutuality also reminds us that maintaining connection and healthy interaction is more important than "winning."

Remember, you're on the same team. Whatever the relationship—romantic, family, friendship or business—we have mutual goals. When we think of ourselves as teammates, we can stay focused on working together rather than fighting against one another... where success is rooted in compromise, collaboration and mutual benefit.

Of course, all relationships will have conflict at some point, or at least differences of opinion. Focusing on mutual needs helps us "fight" more fairly and kindly. When conflict arises, try cooling down and taking breaks, using "I" statements to avoid blame or shame, focusing on one issue at a time and taking accountability to navigate disagreements with more mutuality.





## 4. Respond Consistently

**Responsiveness** is the way we turn toward and engage someone when they're signaling a desire for closeness. Responsive relationship partners convey understanding, validation and sensitivity. There are three major guidelines for more effective responses in any type of relationship: *Is it timely? Is it appropriate and accurate? Does it make the other person feel valued, listened to and understood?*

Timeliness can look like answering texts, emails and phone calls when you receive them, or meeting another person's request as soon as you can manage it. If your child asks you to throw the ball with them but you're on a phone call, make a plan to do it tomorrow, and then keep your word—don't wait until next week!



Appropriate and accurate responses show you're genuinely listening and you value the person's desires. If your partner asks for a candlelight gourmet dinner to celebrate your anniversary, taking them to Taco Bell, for example, doesn't communicate care. Try to meet requests as closely as possible.

Responding to a request or a bid for connection is a great opportunity to demonstrate that the person and their needs matter to you. Say "yes" to requests from friends and loved ones as often as you can, while remaining realistic and honoring your boundaries to avoid burning yourself out. When we fulfill our friends' and loved ones' requests with regularity, they feel seen, heard and appreciated.



## 5. Keep Connecting + Stay Open to the New

"Connection" may mean something different depending on the type of relationship, but no matter what, it's vital to maintain a sense of "togetherness"—whether that's holding hands and exchanging "beam gleams" with a partner, checking in on a friend who's going through a loss or asking a colleague if they need help with a big project.

Especially in long-term or family relationships, it can be easy to fall into a rut or lose motivation to renew feelings of closeness. Creating rituals—like having a special routine with your spouse or child before you go to bed each night—can help rejuvenate and sustain connection.

Our brains are very good at automating our experience—we rarely have to stop and think about driving a car, for example—but if we automate our relationships, we can miss out on the joy of discovery, of who people are and who they're becoming.

Relationships are universes to be explored, forever unfolding in new and expanding directions. Stay curious and continue to uncover the depths and dimensions of possibilities.

In long-term relationships, it can be helpful to plan a regular date or phone call, or schedule little adventures every month to maintain a sense of novelty and aliveness. Keep talking, connecting and exploring together as a way to deepen intimacy and feel more fulfilled in all your relationships.

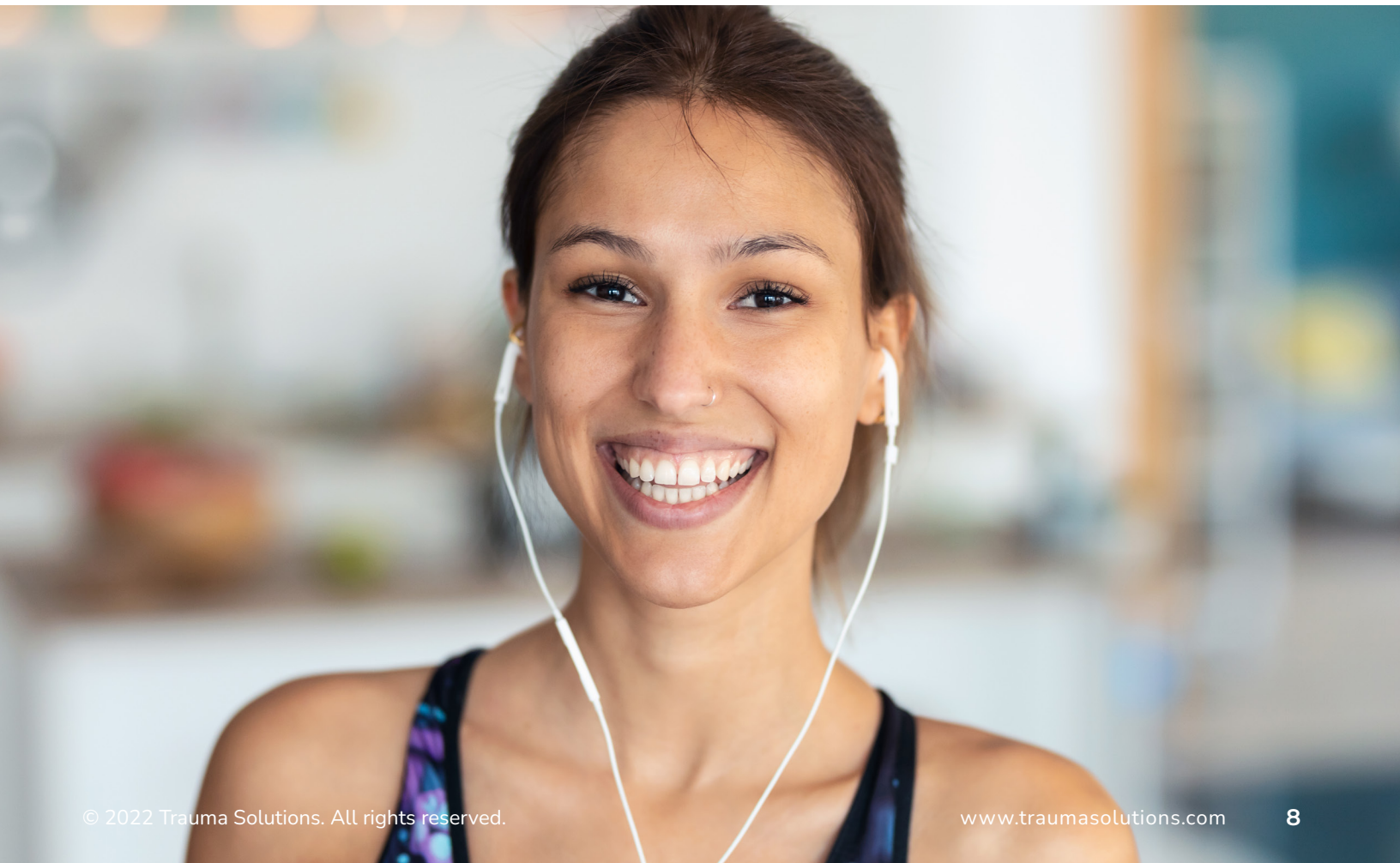


## 6. Find Balance between Closeness and Space

Depending on the stage or nature of the relationship—and each person's attachment style—one partner may desire more space while the other craves closeness. Our needs for space and connection will also change and evolve over time in different relationships.

When we recognize and honor our fluctuating needs, we can understand other people's needs, better communicate our own expectations and navigate the ebb and flow of connection more compassionately and effectively. Securely attached relationships exhibit an easy flow between spending time together and having space for alone time.

In all relationships, we want to strike a *balance* between being close with others without losing ourselves in the process. This applies to friendships, parent-child dynamics and even community and work relationships. Finding equilibrium between dependence and independence leads to *interdependence*, which fosters emotional intimacy while retaining autonomy and a strong sense of self.







## 7. Establish + Maintain Healthy Boundaries

Personal boundaries are the limits and rules we establish in our relationships. There are many types of boundaries including physical, mental, emotional, sexual, financial and time-based. While the word “boundaries” can seem negative, harsh or even prohibitive—boundaries are vital to all healthy and happy relationships.

Healthy boundaries are firm yet flexible, not too rigid or too porous. They prevent over-giving or making promises we can’t keep, which can lead to burnout, resentment and disappointment. I encourage saying “yes” when you can—but maintaining respectful relationships also means honoring the power and kindness of “no.”

Setting boundaries also allows you to communicate needs, clearly express expectations, respect privacy and retain autonomy and space for independence.

Unhealthy boundaries, however, may be too strict or controlling, which can compromise safety in the relationship. On the other hand, a lack of boundaries (or loose and inconsistent ones) can lead to codependency, where we may sacrifice our own needs to appease others. If we grew up in families without clear boundaries or where ours weren’t respected, it may be difficult to establish and enforce rules and expectations, but with practice, we can become more comfortable expressing our wants and needs.

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## 8. Regulate Emotions

- + **Emotional regulation** is the ability to respond rather than react. It requires developing the capacity to notice when you're getting ready to "snap," and then taking a step back to calm before responding. Both self- and co-regulation are important for relational wellbeing.
- + **Self-regulation** is a practice of soothing yourself when you're reactive or dysregulated—things such as deep breathing, meditation, going for a walk, or petting an animal can all help you relax your own nervous system so you can be calmer, more authentic and more effective in your relationships.
- + **Co-regulation** is the process where we help each other feel safe and relaxed, share our calm and support each other with our presence. Co-regulation is especially important in parenting, when a young child may not yet have the ability to self-soothe—but it's a crucial skill for all relationships.

When you hug your partner after an argument, it can help shift your brain from fight/flight to a more communicative and connective state, restoring a sense of safety and mutuality in the relational field.

Another component of emotional regulation is **insight**—having both self-awareness and awareness of the other person. If, for example, you find yourself snapping at a friend, you can recognize that you're actually stressed about work, and communicate that and take accountability. Or if a colleague doesn't call you back right away, you are able to recognize that they might not be great about checking their voicemail and you should send them a text instead. When we're able to use insight to regulate our emotions, it's easier to have patience and not take things as personally!



## 9. Initiate and Accept Repair

None of us is perfect—we can't be present, attuned, joyful or kind *all* the time—but the good news is, we don't have to be. When things go awry, it is possible to repair rifts in our relationships, to reconnect with each other and rebuild. In fact, repair is so important, it's the number one skill I recommend to move toward secure attachment in all of our relationships!

In a study that followed newlyweds for six years, psychologist and relationship researcher John Gottman found that couples who stayed married practiced initiating and receiving repair in their relationships 86% of the time, while those who did so less often got divorced. That's how powerful this technique is.

**Repair** involves noticing when there is a break in connection or flow—a misattunement—and then working to reconcile and reconnect as soon as possible. Repair can include apologizing, making amends, forgiving and/or reestablishing a sense of closeness and understanding.

Accepting gestures and acts of repair from others is a skill in itself, and it's useful to practice. Work on being patient and open to attempts at repair, even when they come in a different form or timeline than you may prefer.

It doesn't matter who extends the olive branch or apologizes first—and even if our attempts at repair are rejected or rebuffed, practicing the skill is still beneficial for us. Regardless of outcome, repair enables us to learn from mistakes, move forward and increase our overall relational capacity and aptitude.



## 10. Foster Joy, Relaxation and Trust!

It's important to remember that while relationships take work—that's not what they're all about! Secure relationships have plenty of room for play, fun and relaxation together. Playfulness is a delightful way to nourish your attachment system and strengthen all types of relationships.



According to the Gottman Institute, a center dedicated to relationship research, happy relationships have a ratio of five positive interactions or feelings for every one negative one. Remember to focus on the good, express warmth and affection, and offer praise and gratitude as often as you can!

And while creating a sense of relaxation and pleasure may not sound like a very serious skill—it's about more than just having fun (although that is important). When we trust and feel safe in relationships, we're able to relax in the relational field, and the more we know we can relax, the more trust we're able to subsequently build.

Relaxation and play help calm and regulate our nervous system, which over time gets trained to feel safe and stay in a “rest, digest and connect” state more often. This fosters emotional regulation and supports our ability to practice attunement and mutuality. More of this calm, empathetic presence also helps us to cultivate intimacy, both romantic and platonic, and the capacity to be vulnerable together—leading to happier, healthier and more authentic relationships of all kinds!



Ready to experience more connection, resilience and joy in your relationships?



## Introduction to Attachment

Turn attachment theory into healthy habits! Purchase now and get immediate access to the [\*\*Introduction to Attachment\*\*](#)—a self-paced, 2-hour, 4-part video training—where Dr. Diane Poole Heller delivers a quick, yet thorough primer on the four attachment styles: secure, avoidant, ambivalent and disorganized.

*For only \$67, here's what you'll learn:*

- + How attachment styles develop—and what it means to have a healthy attachment system.
- + How to identify (and understand) each of the different attachment adaptations, including their language and behavior patterns.
- + Ways that attachment styles can negatively and positively affect relationships (both in our present and our past).
- + Tools, tips and exercises to begin the healing process and help you move yourself and your relationships back towards secure attachment.



This video training includes a short welcome—plus four video and audio recordings, transcripts and a follow-along workbook filled with experiential exercises, tips, and space for reflection—all designed to help you begin your healing journey as you strengthen secure attachment skills.

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