

## **Relational Intelligence**

Adapted from *Bouncing Back: Rewiring Your Brain for Maximum Resilience and Well-Being*  
By Linda Graham, MFT

Relational intelligence is an umbrella term I use for the people skills that allow us to navigate through our world, especially our peopled world, competently, effectively, resiliently. Similar to Daniel Goleman's notion of emotional intelligence, relational intelligence allows our brains to create bonds with others that sustain us through thick and thin. Research shows that these bonds provide us with a deeper sense of happiness and well-being than anything else in the human experience. They are among the resources that sustain our resilience. More and more studies are showing that these skills of relational intelligence are more predictive of our success as human beings – resilience and well-being in the work place as well as in relationships – than I.Q.

These ten exercises in relational intelligence strengthen the structures of the brain we use to relate skillfully and resiliently with others. May they be useful to you and yours.

### **Skill #1: Resonating with the Calm of Others to Calm Ourselves Down**

Our nervous systems have evolved to be affected by the presence of people around us. Because of the efficiency of the relational resonance circuit, which allows us to pick up the physical and emotional “vibe” of another person, just being near a person who is calm helps us return to a sense of calm as well. This means others can help us regain our equilibrium when they are more stable and centered than we are. Simply being present in the same room helps calm our nervous system, even if she are doing something completely different from us. We're preparing our taxes; she is reading the paper. Her presence helps us stay calm and productive, stabilizing the nervous system so that we can remember our own inner resources and utilize well the resources offered by others.

It's a wise harnessing of our neuroplasticity to have someone by our side who can help us stay calm if we've just witnessed or caused a car accident or there's a bomb scare in the building where we work. Any moment when we know we are revving up and need to calm down again so we can deal, we do well to find someone whose calm can calm us down, too.

### **Exercise #1: Breathing Together to Create Calm and Connection**

Here's a very simple exercise to use the breath and touch to create the resonant connection between you and another person that can relax your reactivity and help you return to a state of calm. This exercise is done with a partner. After two to three minutes you can switch roles.

1. Have your partner lie down comfortably on the floor with eyes closed. Sit comfortably on the floor nearby. Come into a sense of presence, of being with this person, here, and now. Place one hand on his hand or forearm, the other hand on the crown of his head. Your partner breathes slowly, deeply. Begin to synchronize your breathing with his breathing. Simply

breathe together for two to three minutes, noticing the life force of the breath entering and leaving his body and yours. You are strengthening the capacities of your resonance circuit to regulate you, and dropping into a shared equilibrium, an equanimity for two.

### **The Neuroscience of Why Resonating with the Calm of Others Calms Us Down**

*Dyadic regulation* is a term used to describe how the calm in one person's nervous system can regulate and calm down the nervous system of another. (Dyad in this context refers to two people interacting with each other.) Dyadic regulation is the process by which the brain of a calm, well-regulated parent "teaches" the brain of a fussy baby to calm down, to soothe itself. Dyadic regulation is operating any time a friend soothes another friend over the loss of a romance or the death of a pet. It operates when a calm person takes charge and leads others to safety from a burning building without panic breaking out.

Dyadic regulation can also help us reengage with ourselves, with others, or with a stressful situation when our survival responses take us in the direction of numbing out or collapsing into helplessness. The reassurance of someone who is calm and stable can encourage us to regroup and try again, too.

Two structures in the brain contribute to effective dyadic regulation. One is the vagus nerve in the brainstem, where all resonance begins. The ventral branch of the vagus nerve perceives safety, trust and calm in situations where there might be danger or life threat and can then slow down our heart rate and breathing. A strong vagal tone in a calm person can evoke a similar response in the brainstem of another person. This vagal regulation is not cognitive or conscious. (Though, of course, thinking our way to a sense of safety and calm can work, too; it just happens more slowly.) Strengthening our own vagal tone by interacting with other well-regulated people is one way that the brain learns to regulate itself, return to a sense of calm and centeredness, and cope.

The other structure is the fusiform gyrus, a small structure in the right hemisphere of the brain that the pre-frontal cortex uses to recognize facial expressions. Studies have shown that when one person sees calm in the facial expression of another person, activity in the amygdala - the fear center - calms down. The functioning of both of these structures is developed through eye contact and mirror neurons, as in relationships of secure attachment and between a true other to true self.

### **Skill #2: Activating "Calm and Connect" Through Touch**

The hormone oxytocin is the neurotransmitter of the "calm and connect" response and is the brain's direct and immediate antidote to the stress hormone cortisol. The fastest way to regulate the body's stress response and return to a sense of calm is to activate the release of oxytocin in the brain.

When oxytocin is released by the hypothalamus (in the limbic system) into the brain and bloodstream, cortisol levels plummet and blood pressure drops. Oxytocin is the neurochemical basis for the felt sense of safety and trust, of connection and belonging. When we know how to

activate the release of oxytocin, we can quickly feel reassured that “everything is OK; everything is going to be OK.”

Oxytocin is a powerful helper in the process of maintaining equanimity and can be thought of as the neurochemical foundation of resilience. Researchers have demonstrated that a single exposure to oxytocin can activate the release of this neurochemical balm and create a lifelong change in the brain.

The fastest way to release oxytocin and calm down stress, even extreme stress, is through safe touch and warmth in a safe, soothing relationship. . Any warm, loving touch – hugs, snuggles, holding hands, partner dancing, cuddles with a pet, massage or body work can trigger the release of oxytocin and bring the body back into a state of calm. Even our own touch, as a reminder of the touch of others, can have this result. Finding ways to “stay in touch” with loved ones is the best possible antidote to stress and a great buffer against trauma.

### **Exercise #2-a: Head Rub**

One fun way to trigger oxytocin release is a gentle, two-minute head rub. You can massage your own head, of course, and you can easily practice this with a partner, friend or co-worker, sensual without being sexual. Use your fingertips to gently massage the scalp, forehead, nose, jaws, and ears. The touch, warmth, and movement release the oxytocin in your brain, lowering your blood pressure and calming your racing thoughts. With a few moments’ respite from stress and pressure, you are primed to cope more resiliently with the next stressor.

### **Exercise #2-b: Massaging the Vagus**

The vagus nerve, loaded with oxytocin receptors, resides in the brainstem. You can easily locate that region by placing your fingers at the back of your skull where the top of your neck nestles into the skull. A gentle massage to that part of the neck (you can easily do this yourself) can be a potent trigger for the self-activated release of oxytocin, increasing feelings of goodness and well-being throughout the day.

### **Exercise #2-c: Hugs**

Stan Tatkin at UCLA has found that, when people feel safe with each other, a twenty-second full-body hug, is enough to release oxytocin in both men and women, to calm down a revved up nervous system, and generate feelings of safety and connection. Most of us don’t feel comfortable with a full-body hug with anyone except a partner, immediate family, or closest friends. We do the A-frame hug of arms around the shoulders at best. The closeness of a full body-hug maximizes the effectiveness, so exchange a full-body hug with somebody you’re comfortable with as often as you can. Twenty seconds is about three long, deep breaths, easy for you and your hug-ee to time on your own. Try changing head positions with each breath.

### **Skill #3: Activating the Release of Oxytocin Through Loving Connection**

We may not always have someone around to give us a hug when we need it most. Fortunately, we are learning from neuroscience that we can also activate the release of oxytocin by connecting or remembering connections with others. Feeling safe and loved in return activates the release of oxytocin in the brain. We can intentionally change our neurochemistry to change our physiological state.

We can give our brains baths of oxytocin whenever we are with someone we truly love and who truly loves us. Neuroscientists have demonstrated many times that even remembering or imagining someone we love, by whom we feel loved, is enough to release small but regular doses of oxytocin. This effect can come from feeling “held” by a spiritual figure or religious deity, as well. When the oxytocin is flowing throughout our system, when we again feel safe in our body and in our world, we can once again think clearly and respond wisely.

As Dan Goleman says in *Social Intelligence*, “Repeated exposures to the people with whom we feel the closest social bonds can condition the release of oxytocin, so that merely being in their presence, or even just thinking about them, may trigger in us a pleasant dose of the good feelings that this molecule bestows. Close, positive, long-term relationships may offer us a relatively steady source of oxytocin release; every hug, friendly touch, and affectionate moment may prime this neurochemical balm a bit. Small wonder office cubicles are papered with photos of loved ones.”

### **Exercise #3: Hand on the Heart**

We come into the steady calm of our own centeredness by experiencing moments of feeling safe, loved, and cherished, and letting those moments register in our body and encode new circuitry in our brain. This exercise is a way to evoke those feelings.

1. Begin by placing your hand on your heart, feeling the warmth of your own touch. Breathe gently and deeply into your heart center, taking in a sense of calm, peace, goodness, safety, trust, acceptance, and ease. You may elaborate these feelings as you wish. Breathe in a sense of contentment, well-being, kindness for yourself, gratitude for others.
2. Once that’s steady, call to mind a moment of being with someone who loves you unconditionally, someone you feel completely safe with. This may, of course, be a partner, child or parent, but if the dynamics of those relationships are complicated and the emotions mixed, you may choose any true other to your true self - a dear friend, a trusted teacher, a close colleague or neighbor, a therapist, your grandmother, a third grade teacher or a spiritual figure like Jesus or the Dalai Lama, or your wiser self. Pets are also great for this exercise.
3. As you remember feeling safe and loved with this person or pet, see if you can sense in your body the positive feelings and sensations associated with that memory. Really savor this feeling of warmth, safety, trust, and love in your body.
4. When that feeling is steady, let go of the image and simply bathe in the feeling itself for 30 seconds. Savor the rich nurturing of this feeling; let it really soak in.

I teach couples to practice Hand on the Heart any time things feel calm and loving between them. (One couple did it every time they passed each other in the hallway.) By practicing this exercise when things are going well, you can wire in a new coping strategy that can then be brought into play anytime your old coping strategies flare into a fight (survival response) or bring them to the precipice of one.

### **The Neuroscience of Activating Oxytocin through Hand on the Heart**

Breathing deeply, gently, and fully activates the calming branch of our autonomic nervous system – the parasympathetic branch. The parasympathetic modulates the body-brain’s fight-flight response when we feel threatened or agitated, help us to stay calm and relaxed, yet engaged and alert. Breathing or *pranayama* has been a core practice in yoga and meditation to relax the body and steady the mind for over 3,500 years. Breathing positive emotions into the heart center steadies the heart rate, restoring the equilibrium of the body.

Neural pathways from the heart to the brain signal the brain directly to release the oxytocin, which evokes a sense of safe connection with others; the oxytocin immediately reduces our stress. (A variation of this exercise comes from Buddhist meditation teachers and authors James Baraz and Tara Brach: to place your hand on your own cheek and say gently, “Oh, sweetheart!” The touch and kind intention of ourself toward ourself will also release oxytocin.)

In evoking a memory or image of feeling loved and cherished, we activate the pre-frontal cortex which triggers the hippocampus to search for explicit memories of when we have been held, soothed, comforted, protected, encouraged, believed in, times when we have reached out for help and received comfort and support. Through safety and trust in connection, we come back to our own inner resources. From there, with our higher, thinking brain calm and alert, we can mobilize quickly act skillfully, and take care of business.

### **Skill #4: The Healing of Presence and Deep Listening**

*The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention.... A loving silence often has far more power to heal and to connect than the most well-intentioned words.*

*-Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D.*

When we want to listen deeply to another person, we prepare ourselves to give them our full attention. We temporarily set aside our own needs, our own agendas. We stop rehearsing what we’re going to say in response to what we anticipate they are going to say. We become present, opening our mind and our heart to the true being of the person underneath the words, underneath the bragging or the complaints. We become curious about what the person is saying, and not saying, what might need more time or deeper trust to be voiced. As Henry David Thoreau said, “The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when one asked me what I thought, and attended to my answer.”

We can bring the same attentiveness and contemplative listening to ourselves. We can practice tuning into our own felt experience, moment by moment. We can notice tension, irritation, restlessness, impatience, boredom, or calm quiet, peace, delight, joy, awe. As we listen more deeply even than the level of our breath, body sensations, feelings, and thoughts about ourselves, we can drop into a quiet space of no chatter, no agenda, no nagging doubts, no habits of perceiving or interpreting ourselves. As we quiet and focus, we can drop into a spacious stillness so calm and clear that we actually begin to sense the wholeness of our true being.

As we learn to listen skillfully to ourselves and others, grounded in that wholeness, we are conditioning in our brains a new way of being with ourselves and with others, creating the safety and trust that is part of our psychological platform of resilience.

#### **Exercise #4: Deep Listening**

*When we shift our attention toward listening, our whole world changes. Learning to listen is equal to learning to love.*

– Ruth Cox

This exercise is done with a partner. Decide who will be speaker first all the way through and who will be the listener first all the way through. When you have each answered the repeating question fully, you can switch roles so you each get the benefit of practicing listening and being listened to.

1. The listener asks the speaker a question (samples below); the speaker answers as honestly, as thoughtfully, as she can. The listener listens silently, though attentively and appreciatively. The listener then simply says “I appreciate you letting me know that,” and asks the same question again. The speaker answers the question again from a different angle or from a deeper level of understanding and inner truth. The listener listens as before, and when the speaker is finished, again says, “I appreciate you letting me know that,” and then repeats the question again. If the speaker doesn’t speak right away, the listener simply maintains a receptive silence. This questioning and response can continue for as long as the speaker is still discovering new understandings or feelings in response to the question.

Here are some sample questions. Choose only one and keep asking it.

What brings you joy in your life?  
 What has brought you sorrow?  
 What worries you now?  
 When have you found courage in dark times?  
 What are you grateful for?  
 What are you proud of?

2. When the speaker is done (and thanks the listener for listening), the two of you switch roles. When you have both experienced listening and being listened to, you can de-brief,

sharing what you noticed about your experience in each role and what you discovered about yourself.

3. Take a moment to integrate this new learning into your ongoing sense of self in relationship to others, creating more safety and trust in relationships. Let yourself take in the good news that exercises like deep listening are strengthening your pre-frontal cortex, and allow even more new conditioning as you go along.

### **The Neuroscience of Why Deep Listening Creates Safety and Trust in Relationships**

The anterior cingulate cortex – the structure we use to focus our conscious attention – also functions as a switching station between the brain’s left hemisphere (primarily responsible for processing our thoughts) and the right (primarily responsible for processing our feelings). The focused attention of deep reflection in response to a repeated question and being attentively listened to (whether in our own minds or by someone else) helps integrate the processing of the brain’s two hemispheres and helps us probe our thoughts and feelings at a deeper level. We often “hear” ourselves in a new way and then, via the pre-frontal cortex, integrating these new understandings about ourselves, or the other, at a deeper level.

This kind of deep listening can lead to the compassionate receptivity that is needed in moments of great loss, in realizations of disturbing truths we don’t want to hear, in times of disorienting change and transition. Compassionate listening requires us to set aside everything that is not simply presence and openness. We listen to the whole being of another with our whole being. We attend to the whole being of our own self.

### **Skill #5: Rewiring Difficult Experiences in Relationships**

*Love guards the heart from the abyss. – Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*

There’s a teaching story in the Buddhist tradition that can guide us in repairing and rewiring any troubling experiences in relationship in the present or traumatizing memories that still hijacks us from the past. If you take a teaspoon of salt, dissolve it in a glass of water, and then take a sip of the water, the water tastes disgusting - it’s too salty to drink. But if you take a teaspoon of salt, dissolve it in a large freshwater lake, then dip the glass into the lake and sip that water, the salt has dissolved in the larger lake; there’s no taste of it at all.

We can dissolve teaspoons of relational upset or trauma in the vast lake of mindful empathy, positive emotions, and our own deep goodness, too, through re-conditioning. Old memories of difficult experiences seem to “dissolve.” They no longer have the power or charge they once had to weaken our internal secure base or de-rail our resilience.

Because re-conditioning is a powerful tool for altering the brain’s circuitry, and because we want to make sure we’re re-wiring old memories and not reinforcing them, I’m going to describe the ground rules before you begin the exercise.

a. Anchor your awareness firmly in the present moment. You are safe here, now, and will still be safe even when you retrieve a memory of what happened back there, back then.

b. Focus your awareness on positive resources first – positive self-regard, self-acceptance, trusting your innate goodness, evoking the wisdom of your Wiser Self.

c. Start small! A teaspoon of trouble, not a ton. One small specific relational moment when resilience went awry.

- You were chosen last for the neighborhood softball team; the sting of “not good enough” lingers to this day;

- You mis-read someone’s worries about not being able to pay their rent this month; you were a little flip in your quick slap on the back and “keep your chin up”; they’ve ignored you now for two weeks steady;

- Your sister-in-law just can’t seem to hear that you won’t be coming to her house for Thanksgiving and will instead celebrate with friends as you have done for the last three years; you resent her obliviousness to your own wishes.

With practice, over time, re-conditioning can indeed dissolve a ton of salt, but please let your brain feel successful with the smaller memories first.

### **Exercise #5: Wished For Outcome**

This exercise creates the resource of a better outcome to recondition a troubling or traumatizing memory.

1. Find a time and place to sit quietly without interruption. Focus your attention on your breathe, breathing calmly and deeply into your heart center. Call to mind a particular moment of ease and well-being, a particular sense of your own goodness, or a moment when you felt safe, loved, connected, cherished. Or think of a moment when you were with someone who loves and believes in you. Remember one of these moments in as much detail as you can, in as many levels of your body-brain as you can – a visual image, the feelings in your body that the memory evokes, any thoughts you have about yourself now as you remember the sweetness of that moment. Let yourself savor this moment in a mindful and compassionate “holding” of the memory.

2. When you feel bathed in the good feeling, and still anchored in the awareness of safety in the present moment, call to mind a moment of experience when things went awry between you and another person. It may be slight or terrible, but if it’s terrible, break the experience to little chunks. As you re-imagine that moment, remain in your observer role rather than reliving the experience. Evoke this memory to light up all the neural networks – visual images, body sensations, emotions, thoughts or beliefs at the time. Recall memories of what you said and did, what someone else said or did; who else was there; how old you were and how old the other person was; what you were wearing and what that person was wearing, Maybe you wish you



could have said or done something differently at the time. Maybe you wish someone else had done something differently at the time, even if that could never have happened in real life.

3. Then begin to visualize a wished for outcome, even if this never could have happened in real life: what you would have said or done differently; what the other person could have done differently. What someone else not even in the original scenario could have said or done. If you simply wish none of this had happened at all, you can imagine what would have happened instead. Let the new story unfold as you would have wished, in as much detail as you can. You are creating a scenario that completely disconfirms or contradicts what happened before.

4. Hold the two scenarios in your awareness at the same time, or switch back and forth between them, always refreshing and strengthening the newer, more positive scenario. After a few moments, “let go” of the old memory and just rest your attention in the new scenario. Let your mind play out this new scenario, and then notice how you feel. Notice any emotions or thoughts or beliefs about yourself that come up now, and if they are more positive, resilient, let them soak in. Then bring your awareness back to the present moment.

### **The Neuroscience of Re-Wiring Difficult Experiences in Relationships**

Using this technique does not change what happened, but it does change our relationship to what happened. It doesn't re-write history but it does re-wire the brain. The kind of careful re-conditioning can re-wire a shame-based sense of self, dissolve self-doubt and smallifying, help the inner critic retire. Altering your brain circuitry through re-conditioning creates a stronger neural platform of resilience in the internal secure base and allows a new relational intelligence to emerge that allows you to deal with even intrusive, withdrawn, hostile people, in any situation, resiliently.

### **Skill #6: Compassionate Communication**

*The roots of resilience are to be found in the felt sense of existing in the heart and mind of an empathic, attuned, self-possessed other.*  
- Diana Fosha

At times our habitual lenses of perception and reactivity can make responsible speaking and empathic listening almost impossible. Both people in a conversation can be caught in a mind-set of “me. vs. you,” “us vs. them,” or “always-never.” The differences feel intolerable and frustrations run high. Learning to communicate your fears and wishes to other people, and receiving their communication about their fears and wishes in return, is a practice of emotional intelligence that will sustain resilience for a lifetime.

When two people meet in mindful empathy, their emotions can be expressed in a fairly straightforward way. This honesty opens the door to perceiving another person's needs, even in a conflict, facilitating a mutual understanding or at least a respect for differences.

### **Exercise #6: Compassionate Communication**

This exercise is adapted from a method originally known around the world as Non-Violent Communication (NVC) developed by Marshall Rosenberg and now called Compassionate Communication. To some, the method can feel structured and mechanical, but when a conflict needs to be expressed and dealt with, it can be worth its weight in gold. When both people become adept at the protocol, they can identify the emotional needs that need to be addressed and choose appropriate actions to address them.

### 1. Stating the Intention

One person begins the conversation with: “There is something happening that’s impacting our relationship. I would like to talk about it. Are you available?” Mechanical! But it does close the exits. The listener agrees to listen respectfully until the speaker is done. If the listener is not available at that moment because he’s out the door on the way to work, or needs to be on an important conference call in five minutes, or is simply frazzled for the day, he can say no, but he must agree to be available within 24 hours. The speaker never has to nag or pursue once the mutual agreement to meet has been made.

### 2. Creating the Conditions to be Heard

Choose a time and place where there will be no distractions or interruptions. With the two sitting face to face, the speaker then states the topic in one sentence, and the listener repeats the topic back word for word so the speaker feels heard. The listener then asks, “Is there more?” That’s it. No commentary, no rebuttal, no resistance, no incredulity. This method completely prohibits any shame-blame-name calling. Safety and mutual respect are the priorities.

### 3) Speaking and Listening

The speaker then begins sharing her experience along the following lines: “I felt really hurt when I perceived (or thought or believed) you were flirting with Sandy at the block party last night.” She acknowledges any of her own subjective impressions or thoughts that may have contributed to the experience. The listener listens, repeats the statement word for word, so the speaker feels heard. “You felt hurt when you thought I was flirting at the block party last night.” The listener expresses no defensiveness, no editorializing, no retaliating, no sharing of his experience. It can be much harder to be the listener than the speaker!

The speaker continues until she is done, focusing on the feelings and needs underneath the facts of the events. Rather than express the problem as a thought – “I feel as if you’re not interested in me anymore” – she tries to get down to the feeling underneath – “I’m worried, and I’m scared.” Getting to the heart of the matter usually takes far less time than one would expect, once the focus is placed on the feelings driving the speaker’s own behaviors.

### 4) Summary of concern

The listener gives a brief summary of the entire concern, and the speaker clarifies until both can agree on a clear statement of it. In this case, it might be: “When you experience me

paying attention to other people and not paying enough attention to you or to us, you're worried that I don't love you as much as I did; that I'm not really there for you."

#### 5) The request for change

The speaker articulates the request that would address the emotional need underneath: "I need to hear from you that you still love me; that you're in this 100 percent." She then identifies three things she is willing to do herself to address her emotional needs, for example: "I will check in with you at least once in the coming week to hear how you feel we're doing as a couple." "I will remind myself that I am loved by you before we go to the football game with Sandy and Jim two weeks from now." "I will pull you aside and speak to you right away the next time I experience any worry about your behavior."

The speaker identifies three things the listener could do that would help address her emotional needs, such as: "I ask that you spend five minutes with me every night this week telling me three things you appreciate about me." "I ask that you include me in at least one conversation you have with Sandy in the coming month." "I ask that you spontaneously give me a big hug and tell me you're glad to see me at least once in the coming week."

The speaker and listener each choose *one* of the three behaviors to do in the specified time period. The requests must be for changes in behaviors (not changing personality or character, but behavior) that are *positive* (specifying what is wanted rather than what is not wanted), *specific, measurable, and set in a specific time frame* so that both speaker and listener know when they have been accomplished.

#### 4. Following through

As the pair implements the change requests, the speaker is responsible for acknowledging and showing appreciation when a request for change has been met. If the change didn't address her emotional need after all, she can use the method again to get clearer and more on target. The listener then takes his turn using the same formula that lets him create the conditions to be heard, communicate his feelings and needs, and present his six requests for change. If each person does one new behavior every week for a year, they will have instituted more than 100 positive changes in their relationship in that year. Pretty resilient!

### **The Neuroscience of Compassionate Communication**

The mechanical formula of this communication tool prohibits the shaming, blaming, and name calling that might otherwise activate the threat response in either person and pre-empts the consequent reaction – either a counter attack or withdrawal-stonewalling. When we're not feeling threatened, the pre-frontal cortex is not hijacked by a threat response nor by the defenses to that perceived threat. The pre-frontal cortex stays active, using the resonance circuit so we can listen to and empathize with the other person in order to reach a resolution. Learning to stay open and respond to requests for changes in behavior strengthens confidence in our ability to resolve complaints and conflicts.

## **Skill #7: Setting Limits and Boundaries**

Developmental psychologists have found that the human brain is capable of distinguishing “I am me and you are you” by six months of age. Theory of mind takes that capacity even further as we mature. Most important for taking our place in the world as independent, resilient human beings, by four years of age our brains are capable of recognizing and accepting that other people may be having thoughts and feelings different from our own. Your thought, belief, impulse, feeling, or reaction to a topic, event, or reality may be completely different from mine at the same moment - and vice versa. And that’s okay.

Theory of mind allows us to develop and maintain an inner subjective reality – a sense of self – that is separate from other people’s opinions and expectations of us. It allows us to be ourselves and other people to be who they are, regardless of our needs or projections. We each have our own inner subjective reality, whether we’re fully or fuzzily in touch with it.

Theory of mind is essential to the brain’s capacity to differentiate our experience from anyone else’s experience. It is a form of mental clarity that leads to relational intelligence. If I get irritated at missing a flight and assume that you are too, rather than noticing that, in fact, you’re not irritated at all – you’re already talking with an agent to get on the next flight – I may miss an opportunity to skillfully negotiate our next steps.

This capacity to differentiate our own thoughts, feelings, reactivity, and responses from another person’s helps us step back from assumptions, rules, and expectations about how we and others *should* feel or behave. Stepping back from “should” is essential for responding flexibly – reminding us that different options are available and that they are valid, a sine qua non of resilience. Setting limits, - trusting we can set a boundary, regardless of the other person’s reactions - also allows us to initiate communication and take risks in relationship that otherwise we might not experience as safe to. We learn to avoid either responding aggressively to protect ourselves or acquiescing completely to another person’s needs when they do not reflect our own needs. This exercise supports the brain’s circuitry to stay open to learning and change.

Secure resonant relationships enhance this capacity of theory of mind; less-than-secure or unempathic relationships typically don’t. So not everyone on the planet has developed this capacity differentiate their experience from that of others by age four. The exercise below uses practice in setting limits and boundaries to strengthen your theory of mind, which strengthens your relational intelligence and resilience.

### **Exercise #7: Setting Limits and Boundaries**

1. Ask a friend to help you in this exercise of finding the sweet spot in setting a limit or boundary, not tapping into aggression, nor collapsing into being a doormat. The point of the brain training here is for you to be able to differentiate your needs and views from another person’s and to assert them skillfully, not reactively. Settle into your own mindful empathy before you begin.

2. Identify one limit or boundary you've been reluctant to set: an earlier curfew for your daughter on school nights; a limit on interruptions from a co-worker; say no to a sister-in-law who expects to camp out in your living room rather than stay in a hotel when she and her family visit. Your friend plays the role play of the other person.

3. Clarify in your own mind how setting this limit reflects and serves your own values, need and desires. Then try to understand the values, needs and desires of the person. Jot down notes if you wish. Notice any common ground between the two of you; notice your differences. Notice your own experience; come to a sense of groundedness and presence in your body.

4. Initiate the conversation about limits with the other person. Begin by expressing your appreciation for their listening to you. State the topic; state your understanding of your own needs and of theirs. Check to see if your understanding of their point of view is accurate. Coach the friend in the role of the other person as needed, but keep the focus of the exercise on setting the limit, independent of the other person's reaction. Refresh your empathy by tuning in to what you are experiencing in the moment and what the other person may be experiencing; refresh your mindfulness to be aware and accepting of what is happening.

5. State the terms of your limit, simply, clearly, unequivocally. You've already stated the values, needs and desires behind the limit; you do not have to justify, explain or defend your position. This is *your* limit. Reiterate the terms of your limit, as many times as is needed for the person you are talking to - your role-playing partner - to understand and accept it.

6. For purposes of this exercise, your role-playing partner does accept your limit. Notice how you experience this success; notice any changes in your view of yourself in relationship and in your view of your skills in relational intelligence.

### **The Neuroscience of Setting Limits and Boundaries**

*Theory of mind* is a complex mental capacity that involves the pulling together of the functions of the focusing (self-referential) network of the brain. The same brain structures we use to construct our personal sense of self - the pre-frontal cortex, the anterior cingulate, the insula, and the hippocampus - allow us to create a mental representation of another person's self, or at least some aspects of their experience. This process is known as *mentalizing*. Mentalizing involves more than thinking *about*; it means being able to generate a clear cognitive understanding of the other person's reality as different from our own. The focusing network integrates information we pick up about the other person from brainstem-based resonance. The reading of emotional meaning by the right hemisphere and the cognitive understanding of the left hemisphere lead to an empathic articulation of the other person's experience as different from our own, essential for relational intelligence and resilience.

### **Skill #8: Negotiating Change**

When we experience conflict or disagreement in relationship, often we can see clearly what the other person is doing wrong, but we find it much harder to see clearly how what *we* are saying or doing may be hurting us, the other person, or the dynamic of the relationship. The

other person may be able to let you know (skillfully) what he sees you doing that is problematic: lacking clarity about your own needs or limits, withdrawing into a shell instead of staying engaged in dialogue, or acting in a belligerent way (strategies that may seem completely natural and justified to you.)

The chances are that your part in any impasse stems from habits of reacting learned from previous relationships. You might tend to keep your own needs or desires close to the chest to avoid provoking an angry response; as a result, the other person has no clue where you stand or what you need. You might have a habit of avoiding a difficult conversation in order to preserve a relationship, even if the remaining connection feels increasingly tenuous. Or your automatic response to the discomfort of a dilemma might be telling the other person off in no uncertain terms, without giving him a chance to present his side of the dilemma. If you acknowledge the accuracy of these observations, and identify the old pattern that isn't working in the current situation, you can use the process of reconditioning to undo old behaviors or patterns of relating by completely rewiring the neural circuitry that underlies them.

In negotiating positive change in any relationship, mindfulness – seeing clearly what we are saying or doing, and tolerating what we are seeing – is an essential tool. Self-empathy and self-compassion – for why we are saying or doing what we are saying or doing – are also essential. Taking responsibility for our part in creating any snafu or impasse in a relationship deepens our relational intelligence and lays the groundwork for asking for change in another person's behavior as well.

### **Exercise #8: Negotiating Change**

1. Identify a problem in the dynamic between you and another person. Perhaps communication between you and a co-worker has unraveled to the point where deadlines are being missed. The sting from a careless comment by a friend has strained the connection between the two of you for more than a week. It's been two months since you've moved out; your former landlord still hasn't returned the security deposit and your attempts to recover the deposit have only led to stalemate.
2. Summoning up your willingness to be ruthlessly honest and clear with yourself, let yourself see clearly what you might have said or done that might be contributing to the current impasse.
3. Make a conscious choice to act in a different way to re-wire the old circuitry. For example, you might experiment with stating your needs with your co-worker. This not only re-opens communication but will also cause your neural patterns to fire in a new, even contradictory direction, which gives your brain the opportunity to re-wire the old circuitry. You might ask your friend to participate in some deep listening not only re-engage in a dialogue with a friend who is important to you but also to give your brain the opportunity to use the new experience (engaging) to trump the old pattern (withdrawing) and re-wire or even completely dissolve the old circuitry. Or you might take a friend with you the next time you talk with your former landlord to calm your nervous system, giving your brain the opportunity to re-wire a pattern of belligerence into a more effective communication pattern.

7. Notice any changes in the dynamics of your relationships as you take responsibility for your part in them and deliberately choose to re-condition the neural circuitry underlying habitual patterns of reactivity. Notice any changes in your own sense of relational competency and relational intelligence. All of these changes in your sense of self are a form of re-conditioning.

### **The Neuroscience of Negotiating Change**

Re-conditioning works best when we can “light up” every channel of the neural network – sensing the body sensations of withdrawal and engaging, feeling the emotions of fear or anger and then the emotions of trust or calm, noticing the thoughts that accompany avoidance as opposed to deep listening, or becoming defiant as opposed to asking for help.

In this exercise, when you choose to think, feel, or act in a way opposite to the way you have been habitually thinking, feeling, or acting, you are shaking up the firing of neurons in your neural circuitry and nudging that circuitry into new patterns and pathways. Many times, when the new behavior “trumps” the old, it triggers major re-wiring, too. Suddenly the new feels so normal that we wonder why we ever thought otherwise

This skill takes practice, but it pays off in being able to negotiate more skillfully when the boss asks us to work overtime two weekends in a row or when talking with an elderly parent about giving up driving. Resilience opens up options.

### **Skill #9: Repairing a Rupture**

*People will forget what you said; people will forget what you did. People will never forget how you made them feel.*  
- Maya Angelou

Researchers have discovered that even in “good enough” close relationships we spend about one third of the time in actual relating (attuned connection) about one third in rupture (mis-attuned or disrupted connection) and one third in repair (recovering the attuned connection.) Repair is the most important phase of this rhythm, especially in terms of re-wiring our patterns of behavior.

Years ago, I was visiting relatives in northern Minnesota on their summer vacation and witnessed a brilliant example of repair. My 7-year-old cousin Marty was fishing off the dock one. His mom, my aunt Gen, came out to check on him, noticed his mouth was covered in jelly and crumbs from his morning donut, and scolded him for being so messy as she wiped his face clean. Marty’s body visibly slumped in a sulk. As Gen started to walk back to the house, Marty’s dad, my uncle Ted, who had watched the whole scene, walked over to Marty, put his hand gently on his shoulder and reassured him, “That’s Okay, son. Fish bite better with a dirty face anyway.” Marty gave his dad a smile and a high five, and joyfully went back to fishing.

Gen, who had watched Ted’s skillful repair to Marty’s self-esteem, decided to try to make amends with Marty, taking responsibility for causing a rupture in Marty’s self-esteem as

well as with her. She went into the house for more donuts. Back on the dock, she handed one to Ted to eat and ate one herself. Gen intentionally left crumbs on her face, then asked Marty, “How’s the fishing?” Marty looked at her, got her attempt at repair, laughed and gave her a big hug.

Skill in repair strengthens the security of our connections with others and our sense of mastery in relating. When we trust our competency at repairing a rupture and re-connecting in a relationship, we are more willing to take the risks that build trust in relationships and make them worthwhile.

Repairing connection requires mindful empathy on at least one side of the rupture – and ideally on both - as well as some of the skills of relational intelligence you’ve already been learning. Through presence and deep listening, you create the sense of safety that allows the brain to stay open to new information, new understanding. When you see the goodness in yourself and the other, you gain a larger awareness of empathy and understanding that can help both of you see options and choices. When you take responsibility for our part in the rupture, as you do also when you are setting boundaries and negotiating change, you can more easily initiate and follow up on the repair. Repairing a rupture is practice in creating an outcome both of you wish for.

### **Exercise #9: Repairing a Rupture**

1. Identify a person you feel comfortable asking to practice this exercise with you, and identify a sense of rupture or disconnect between the two of you that you would like to repair. The rupture could have been caused by a mis-understanding or mis-communication. (Small is a good way to begin.) Your focus will be on repairing the relationship, not repairing the mis-understanding, and privileging re-connecting over who’s right or wrong.

2. Sit down together, face-to-face, and take a moment for both of you to come into a state of mindful empathy, each becoming aware of what you are experiencing in your own body and emotions in this moment, remembering what you value in this relationship, why you are motivated to repair it, and feeling compassion caring for both yourself and your partner.

3. Take turns expressing your own experiences of events that caused the rupture, and emotions you have experienced since. Listen deeply and carefully to your partner’s experience of the events that caused the rupture and the emotions since. Notice what’s happening in your own body as you begin to understand and empathize with your partner’s experience.

4. Now take turns expressing your understanding and empathy for the other person’s experience. This conveying of empathy isn’t about fixing or even agreeing. It’s about conveying understanding and experiencing that understanding, resonating with the other person.

5. Notice your own experience as you receive your partner’s empathy for your experience. Notice if the receiving their empathy leads to a re-engaged resonance, a renewed sense of trust, a sense of re-connection and repair. Share your experience.



6. Acknowledge yourself and your partner for your efforts in this exercise. If there has indeed been a repair, acknowledge that, too.

### **The Neuroscience of Repairing a Rupture**

Mindful empathy and a strong capacity to differentiate your experience from the other person's (theory of mind) are crucial to the success of repairing a rupture and re-conditioning your neural circuitry. When you can remain mindful of your own experience, you can easily use the resonance circuitry in your own brain to empathize with the other person's experience. Your empathy also engages the resonance circuit of your partner if that person is able to acknowledge and accept the empathy. It is that experience within your partner's resonance circuit, of feeling seen and understood, that allows the re-connection and repair to occur. The resonance of feeling seen and understood actually relaxes the neural circuitry, allowing it to be more flexible and thus open to new information, open to repair.

When both people are mutually trying to repair, the safety they create for each other through the re-engaging of the resonance circuits, and the result flexibility of the neural circuitry, makes the repair happen much more easily and quickly. Success becomes self-reinforcing. As we're learning that we *can* repair a rupture, we increasingly trust ourselves to become competent in doing so.

### **Skill #10: Forgiveness: the Ultimate Repair**

*Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude. – Martin Luther King, Jr.*

Most of us will experience injury, injustice, disappointment, or betrayal at some point in our lives. Staying caught in those experiences can block our resilience and our relational intelligence from developing. Continuing to feel judgment, blame, resentment, bitterness and hostility against those who have caused us harm can cause us pain and suffering ourselves. The same can be true if we haven't been able to forgive ourselves for harm we have caused others or ourselves. In order to re-wire the patterns of complaining, criticism, disgruntlement, and contentiousness we can so easily get stuck in, we can use de-conditioning to open us to the genuine understanding, compassion, grieving and forgiveness that are needed to move forward into resilient coping and relational intelligence.

When we drop below the level of story, below the level of our personal emotional pain, into the deep inner knowing of our own goodness, we can remember the inherent goodness in all of human beings, regardless of the conditioning that overlays and obscures it. In the mode of defocusing, where de-conditioning takes place, we access inner states of kindness, compassion, and goodwill; we evoke the state of processing in the brain from which it is possible to forgive.

Forgiveness does not mean a condoning, pardoning, forgetting, false reconciliation, appeasement or sentimentality. It is a practice, daily and lifelong, of cultivating our own inner peace and wisdom that allows us to see that our pain is part of the pain of all human beings

universally, to re-set our moral compass, and to remain compassionate even in the face of injustice, betrayal and harm.

### **Exercise #10: Forgiveness**

This formal forgiveness practice is adapted from an exercise learned from the Buddhist meditation teacher Jack Kornfield.

1. Let yourself sit comfortably, allowing your eyes to close and your breath to be natural and easy. Let your body and mind relax. Breathe gently into the area of your heart, letting yourself feel all the barriers you have erected and the emotions you have carried because you have not forgiven yourself or others. Let yourself feel the pain of keeping your heart closed.

2. Breathing softly, moving through each of the following possibilities for forgiveness. Begin reciting the suggested words, letting the healing images and feelings that come up grow deeper as you repeat the phrases of forgiveness.

3. Seek forgiveness from others with the following words: *There are many ways that I have hurt and harmed others, have betrayed or abandoned them, caused them suffering, knowingly or unknowingly, out of my pain, fear, anger, and confusion.*

Let yourself remember and visualize the ways you have hurt others. See the pain you have caused out of your own fear and confusion. Feel your own sorrow and regret. Sense that finally you can release this burden and ask for forgiveness. Take as much time as you need to picture each memory that still burdens your heart. And then as each person comes to mind, gently say: *I ask for your forgiveness, I ask for your forgiveness.*

4. Seek forgiveness for yourself with the following words: *Just as I have caused suffering to others, there are many ways that I have hurt and harmed myself. I have betrayed or abandoned myself many times in thought, word, or deed, knowingly or unknowingly.*

Feel your own precious body and life. Let yourself see the ways you have hurt or harmed yourself. Picture them, remember them. Feel the sorrow you have carried from this and sense that you can release these burdens. Extend forgiveness for each act of harm, one by one. Repeat to yourself: *For the ways I have hurt myself through action or inaction, out of fear, pain, and confusion, I now extend a full and heartfelt forgiveness. I forgive myself, I forgive myself.*

5. Find forgiveness for those who have hurt or harmed you with the following words: *There are many ways I have been harmed by others, abused or abandoned, knowingly or unknowingly, in thought, word or deed.*

You have been betrayed. Let yourself picture and remember the many ways this is true. Feel the sorrow you have carried from this past. Now sense that you can release this burden of pain by gradually extending forgiveness as your heart is ready. Recite to yourself: *I remember the many ways others have hurt, wounded, or harmed me, out of fear, pain, confusion, and*

*anger. I have carried this pain in my heart long enough. To the extent that I am ready, I offer you forgiveness. To those who have caused me harm, I offer my forgiveness, I forgive you.*

Gently repeat these three directions for forgiveness until you feel a release in your heart. For some great pains you may not feel a release; instead, you may experience again the burden and the anguish or anger you have held. Touch this softly. Be forgiving of yourself for not being ready to let go and move on. Forgiveness cannot be forced; it cannot be artificial. Simply continue the practice and let the words and the images work gradually in their own way. In time you can make the forgiveness meditation a regular part of your life, letting go of the past and opening your heart to each new moment with a wise loving kindness.

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### **The Neuroscience of Forgiveness**

Forgiveness is a powerful practice that begins to ease the shift between the focusing mode of processing in our brain – the self-focused, narrowly-focused, past and future oriented mode that could be described as the mode of “me” – to the defocusing mode of processing – more expansive (even universally oriented) mode that could be described as the mode of “we.” The defocusing mode allows us to see other people’s struggles and suffering as well as our own from a much larger and more compassionate perspective. When we are caught in habitual self-limiting patterns of resentment and hostility, we can let ourselves drop into that merciful spaciousness from which new, more adaptive responses can emerge.